

COMPANION FOR THE MUSEUM - GOER

RECOLLECTION RETROSPECTIVE



COMPANION FOR  
THE MUSEUM-GOER

a three-part exploration of art



Recollection Retrospective

a project by Kit Moran





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COMPANION FOR THE MUSEUM-GOER

part one

# LOOKING



*How do we really look at art?*

Examples taken exclusively from works the author,  
Kit Moran, has visited in person.



1.

# *Inside the Gallery*

You, the museum-goer, do not experience art in a vacuum.

On the contrary, the Gallery or Museum is full of air, and bodies, and phones, and noise, and space, and light, and walls, and colour. And so, it is valuable for each and every gallery visitor to consider how the environment affects what we see, how we see it, and how we remember it.

We may be familiar with artworks in the abstract before we encounter them in the Gallery space, or have an image of them in our minds that is comprised entirely of digitally enhanced JPEGs sourced from Wikipedia or dusty exhibition guides. But it is important that we engage with the real artwork as we really see it, taking our environments into consideration, so that we are not only basing our feelings about a piece of art on what we have seen and read about it online, devoid of physical context.

Museum and Gallery spaces are constantly moving and changing, and the way we get to view a painting can change depending on factors as simple as time of day. What we literally see in the Gallery space alters our perception of an artwork, whether we are aware of it or not.

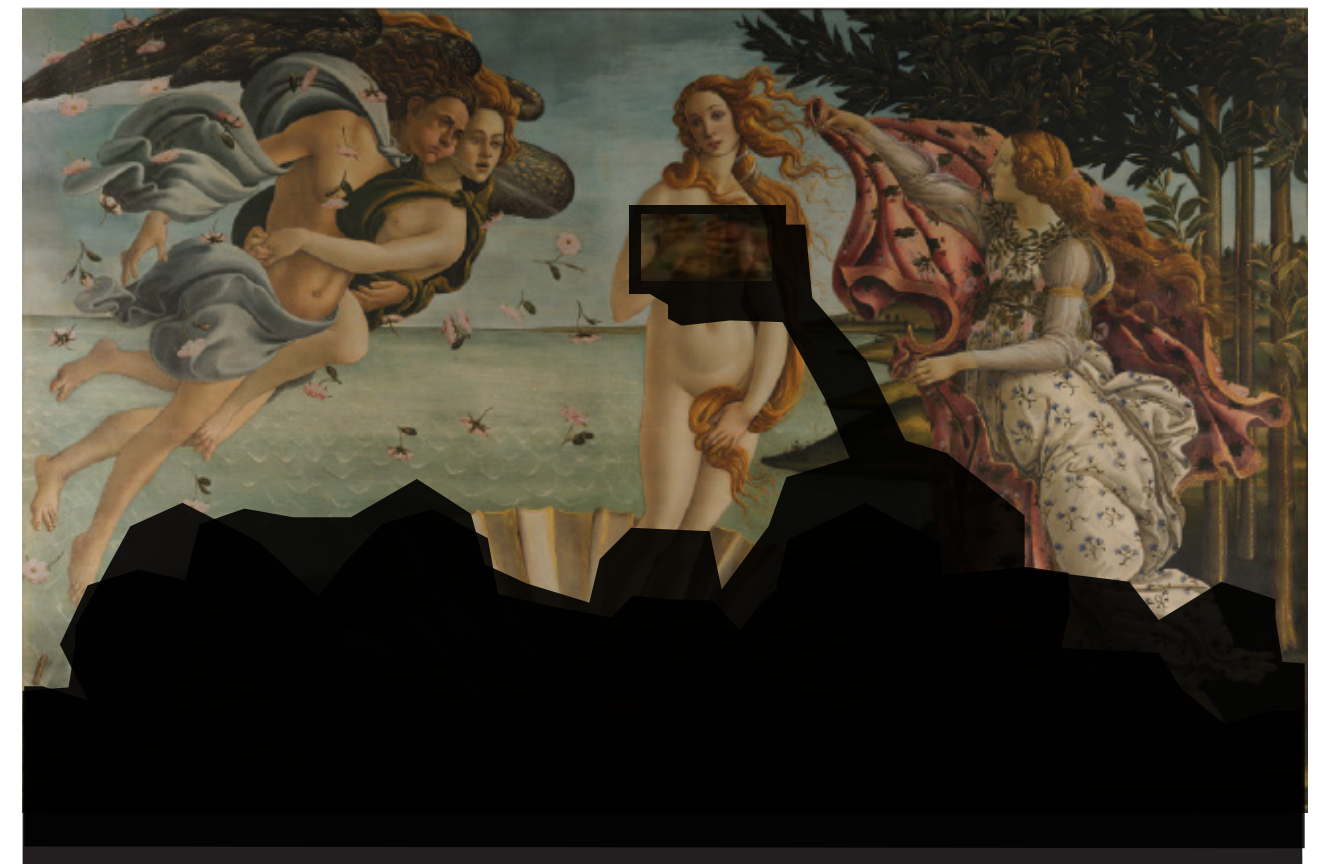
For example,

**Figure 1:** The Birth of Venus, painted by Sandro Botticelli in 1485-6. Here it is completely isolated, an image we may see online.

**Figure 2:** The Venus Experience. Visiting the painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence will never be a solo adventure: you will view the painting through a mass of bodies, through phone screens and golden frames, and so the work has changes for you.

*Push your way*

Fig. 2



*through the bodies*



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Museum and gallery spaces are constantly shifting and changing, and the way we go to view a painting can change depending on factors as simple as time of day. What we literally see in the gallery space often can completely transform, whether we are new and free to go.

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RECOLLECTION RETROSPECTIVE



Separating our online, abstract experience of art from our physically lived experience is important because these avenues produce different feelings and thoughts. That is not to say that viewing an artwork online, or on video, or through any sort of replica, is an inherently valueless experience. It is not. Much can be learned and loved through paintings on postcards or Instagram stories. Many artists today anticipate online, second-hand viewing. They may even create their artworks so that they can only be viewed and interacted with online. But throughout all of this, it is still important to understand the differences between second-hand and first-hand viewing, simply so that we can better comprehend our own experiences, and why we think the way we do about art.

Many artists of old anticipated their artworks being encountered in very specific ways, in specific buildings and under specific lighting. Because of this, they crafted their artworks in ways that would be elevated by their environments, creating a deep and thoughtful atmosphere for us to experience.

But for many artists, this original experience they had in mind is irrevocably lost due to the whims of time and art trading. In the wake of these original plans, new experiences and feelings can be crafted by contemporary curatorial choices.

Inside the exhibition space, you must consider the colour, lighting, and decoration of the walls in relation to the artworks you have come to see. Lots of thought goes in to such a seemingly frivolous design choice, and if you pay attention you can notice what a significant difference such details can make. Lighting is often strategically used to illuminate certain features of an artwork, and it is becoming more and more common for exhibitions to incorporate lights with motion sensors, especially when illuminating objects that cannot be exposed to light for too long.

The modern Gallery space is sometimes colloquially mocked for its 'white cube' aesthetic vision, a modernist trend that has unfortunately taken root in the minds of many. But this type of simple architecture is more and more becoming an unfair stereotype, as it is the mission of many curators working today to utilise interesting shapes, colours, and graphics to complement the works they're arranging. The space itself has become part of the modern Museum narrative, and curators like to bring the space into the story instead of pushing it to the background.

Different displays and exhibitions may use different colours for different reasons. Sometimes, a wall colour is intended to be ignored, other times it is intended to make the pictures stand out or highlight them in some way. In an artwork's lifetime it may be displayed upon a myriad of different walls, with each background creating a different visual effect for us to ponder. This also provides new reason for Gallery visitors to view an artwork multiple times, pondering how it may be rearranged and moved throughout a space overtime.

You can think about these changes through a comparative lens. Try it for yourself, and see how surrounding colour can make a real difference to how your eye consumes an artwork.

For example,

**Figure 3:** Feast of the Rosary, painted by Albrecht Dürer in 1506.

**Figure 4:** The Rosary Experience. This painting was displayed against a bright green background at the National Gallery exhibition *Dürer's Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist* in 2022. This simple change makes the painting feel brighter, more luscious, and seemingly never-ending. The downward lighting also exaggerates the golden frame and bright pigments of the painting.

And what of the size and shape of a painting? Or its placement next to others?

In both permanent collections and temporary exhibitions, a lot of thought is also put into where and how paintings are placed in the Gallery space, on their walls or otherwise. The way you view them is altered by their positioning within the space; a work might look distorted if it is placed too high up on a wall, or strange if it is placed too low. It is not just the colour or design of a space that makes a difference, it is the space and the art working together.

Artworks with similar symbolism, themes, or subjects are also often placed next to each other to purposefully evoke comparison; the viewer is encouraged by the artworks' placement to think about their differences and similarities within both a visual and historical context. This can help viewers form an art-historical timeline in their heads, or help them to become familiar with common subjects or symbolism.

Fig. 4





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Fig. 3





Many curators like to think about how paintings work together in a sequence, even unrelated paintings that only share some surface-level elements to connect them. Placing different works next to each other can tell a certain story or fit a certain theme that an exhibition is trying to achieve.

On a more literal, visual level, placing objects next to each other is an easy way to immediately emphasise their size differences. There is no real limit to how small or how large a artwork can be, and these sizes often tell us something about the artwork itself.

Large paintings may catch our eye first, or surround us in visual experience, but smaller paintings can just as easily harbour impressive detail and personal, intimate, portable value. And these qualities are emphasised by comparison.

For example,

**Figure 5:** Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?), painted by Jan van Eyck in 1433.

**Figure 6:** The van Eyck Experience. For a long time in the National Gallery, this painting was displayed next to a larger and more famous work, the Arnolfini Portrait, perhaps overshadowing this delicate, miniature painting as the eye glosses over the small in favour of the large.

*‘The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.’*

*- John Berger, Ways of Seeing*

Fig. 5



Fig. 6









## 2.

# Value of the Eye

It is not just the environment that effects how we see a work of art, however. The mind and eye of the museum-goer such as yourself, is as just as much of import.

There are some qualities of works of art that are not properly conveyable through the digital world, regardless of environmental, architectural, or atmospheric affects. They are subjective experiences, tricks of the eye, or emotional responses that vary from person to person. Very rarely is our visual experience of an artwork truly objective.

For John Berger, influential art theorist, it was a painting's monumental silence and stillness that moved him. He likened this meditative experience to a kind of time travel; as the viewer stands still in their own bubble of time, they are visually connected to the frozen, silent fragment of time captured within a painting, bridging the gap between eras through art.

For others, it is often the strange visual tricks that an artwork can play on the eye that draw a person in. Colour, perspective, or framing can all tell your brain that there are auras or shapes when there are not. Sometimes this is an effect purposefully crafted by an artist through optical illusions, but other times it is simply the differences of each human eye and mind that create such effects. It is a fascinating, psychedelic show, and it makes artworks stand out in one's memory.

For example,

**Figure 7:** Cymon and Iphigenia, painted by Frederic Lord Leighton in 1884.

**Figure 8:** The Iphigenia Experience. This painting, housed in the National Gallery of New South Wales, is so orange to the eye in real life that it seems to glow.

Fig. 8





2.

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8 .pi7

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Fig. 7





The eye can also be forced to view paintings in certain ways, depending on a painting's size or placement. It can be exceedingly difficult to picture the size of an artwork without having visited it and viewed it with your own eyes, and the disparity between expectation and reality can be very alarming.

Small object can seem infinitesimal and so much more fragile in person.

Large artworks can swallow you whole.

These large artworks in particular can force the eye by refusing to be captured within a person's field of vision all at once. When an artwork takes up a whole wall, it is exceedingly difficult for you, the museum-goer, to view the whole thing like you might do when flipping through a textbook. Instead, you can only view cropped sections of it as your eye allows. If the room is large enough, you can move your body further away to view the whole piece, perhaps sacrificing the amount of detail you can study at the same time.

For example,

**Figure 9:** Water-Lilies, painted by Claude Monet after 1916.

**Figure 10:** The Water-Lilies Experience. This painting is almost 4 and a half metres in length, and is not even one of Monet's largest. The size of this work completely changes how you see it in real life; impacting not only the angle you can view it from but also the details you can perceive up close.

However both large and small artworks can include details that promote what is often referred to as 'slow looking'. This is a process by which artists may include huge amounts of small details, a clear narrative structure, or incredibly impressive brushwork to force a person to have to look over the work slowly to truly understand it. Many narrative biblical paintings do this by featuring multiple scenes from the bible in one painting, meaning you will see Jesus five times on one canvas as he moves through a specific narrative. This encourages the viewer to find the start and end point, to think carefully about what they're seeing to make sense of the overwhelming scale and detail of a work.

Small artworks can encourage slow looking and emotional connection through other avenues outside of overwhelming scale. Portable shrines, locket, or pendants, encourage their viewers to revisit the artwork multiple times, to carry it with them and experience it in different environments. These small artworks often also feature opening and closing mechanisms, or are attached to chains that can be worn on the body. These features also encourage a certain type of interaction and looking; by being so interactive and personal, the viewing of the artwork is tied to movement, touch, and repetitive ritual, which makes the experience of the work that much more intimate.

Attention can also be drawn through other means. Within the Museum or Gallery space, a curator or exhibition designer may draw your attention to specific details in a work of art by featuring illustrations or cropped images on the walls, intended to accompany the museum-goer in their learning. These graphic choices can focus on texture or particular figures in a painting to accompany an explanation of its materials or subject matter. These graphics are carefully planned in Gallery spaces, and add an extra layer of visual interest.

Similarly, a Gallery or Museum space may also include pictures of an artwork under X-ray. X-ray is used by conservators and art researchers to better understand the composition of a work, and to look at the underlying sketch beneath a finished painting. Sometimes all this reveals is minor changes to the original composition, but other times this can reveal whole new hidden paintings that have never before been seen. Some artists of old liked to re-use their canvases, and so X-ray technology can be used to reveal to the museum-goer a whole new layered experience of an image they wouldn't otherwise have access to.

Some art is comprised of these small, painstaking details to encourage slow looking, whereas other works purposefully exaggerate the form of the medium to evoke a sense of style or emotion. Artists like the previously-mentioned Monet utilised this type of technique as part of the Impressionist art movement, where vivid brush strokes gives way to a kind of blurred, mottled composition that seems to come together when a person looks at it from afar. One can see how, stylistically, the artist may find ways to encourage certain types of looking, goading the viewer into moving closer or further away.

Fig. 9





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Fig. 10





When considering physicality, we must also consider the sculpture: as a JPEG the work is flattened, reduced to two dimensions. In the Gallery or Museum however, one can move around the sculpture, perceiving it from many different angles, viewpoints, and areas of lighting.

This movement seems to give the object itself a sense of motion. Light warps and waves across its planes as you move. The perspective changes too, and every carved shape looks different when you look at it from a different vantage point.

For large statues, this movement can be immense and exaggerated. Small statues, it is as if every detail can be scanned and captured within your mind. And for life-size statues, it may feel as if you are witnessing a frozen moment in time, a body just like your own rendered in marble.

For example,

**Figure 11:** Eve listening to the voice, sculpted by Edward Hodges Baily in 1842.

**Figure 12:** The Eve Experience. This sculpture, housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, can be walked around freely as you look upon Eve at eye-level. Each new angle reveals new shadows, shapes, and dimension to the figure. You can stare into her eyes and see if she looks back.

*‘We never look at just one thing;  
we are always looking at the  
relation between things and  
ourselves.’*

*- John Berger, Ways of Seeing*

Fig. 11



Fig. 12





# Ask yourself:

Museum-goer, consider these documented examples and apply them to your own looking.

Ask yourself:



How is the environment changing how I view this artwork?



What do the colours, lights, bodies, and shapes tell me?

How does my subjective eye affect my understanding and connection to the art I am seeing?

How do the artworks tell a story next to each other?



How can I move around an artwork to find something new?



Be diligent in our digital world.

Remember: how we experience art changes each time and is impacted by choices made by people we'll never meet or know.



*Inner covers:*  
Madonna of the Pomegranate, detail, Sandro Botticelli, c.1487.







COMPANION FOR THE MUSEUM-GOER

part two

# FEELING



*How do we physically and emotionally connect to art?*

Examples taken exclusively from works the author,  
Kit Moran, has visited in person.



# 1.

# *What do you feel?*

In the Gallery or Museum, it is typical for your sense of touch to be restricted. This is in part to make sure the artworks do not get damages, but it also comes from a long tradition of valuing the visual over the tactile in the Gallery or Museum space. Despite this restriction though, there are still other ways to *feel*: through light, through sound, through environment and immersion.

Beyond looking, there are many ways that art in the Gallery or Museum, as we know it currently, engages the other senses to construct an narrative experience. Consider the use of sound, video, and light. All of these sensations can wash over you in a pseudo-tactile way, engaging your body beyond just your eyes as you move through the space. The lines are increasingly blurred between audience and participant in the Gallery space, especially when it comes to modern and contemporary art installations.

You might walk through lights that flicker, or catch the sounds of a video playing as you move through the space. You may experience different scents or temperatures, some intentional and some not. You may be asked to walk directly through an artwork that takes up a whole room, that *is* the whole room. You may be asked to touch, or speak, or stand still, or watch, or listen. The Gallery, Museum, and Artist may ask a lot of you, in the name of creating something worthwhile.

For example,

**Figure 1:** Installation from Termite Economies, created by Nicholas Mangan. CRT TVs are becoming an increasingly common way to display video in the gallery space. With this technology comes new light, sound, and moving image, all encased within a nostalgic and claustrophobic heavy plastic case. Watch it glow and move.

Fig. 1





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Some museum-goers, such as yourself, may visit a Gallery or Museum with their sketchbooks and watercolours to create a sensory proxy of an artwork. By drawing or painting an artwork frozen on a Gallery wall, looking is combined with feeling and creation, bringing the artwork into your own hands. This creates a unique type of tactile interaction with a work of art, where the viewer can touch the work and recreate it through the proxy of their own pencil and paper.

For example,

**Figure 2:** The Toilette, painted by Charles Robert Leslie in 1849.

**Figure 3:** The Toilette Experience. Here, it is rendered entirely through someone else's sketches; you are seeing the original through another's interpretation. Through this mediation of vision, mind, and hand, you can glean an understanding of the original painting's visual and symbolic qualities as experience personally by an individual.

This way of engaging with an artwork is another method of encouraging slow looking within yourself, discussed in the previous section of this guide. But it is not purely a visual exercise; when drawing from a reference, one's hands must trace the same lines of the same shapes in the original artwork. It is in this way that the work is reproduced with tactility; it's a clever way to feel an artwork without really feeling it.

This type of process is quite a common activity used in art courses; students will be assigned artworks to study and recreate, because the in-person analysis of an artwork in this way not only helps your physical experience in the Gallery, but also is a tried and tested method for improving artistic skill and technique. The Gallery space does not have to be simply a place of looking and nothing else, even with restricted access to touch. You may just have to adjust your understanding of what *feeling* can be, beyond reaching out and touching things with your hands.

There can also be an argument made that photographing artworks on your phone is also a uniquely tactile way of navigating the Museum. It has become commonplace to deride the use of cameras and phones in the Gallery, as many believe it shows a disconnect from one's environment or can

be disruptive and loud. It's true that a camera flash can be disruptive, but quietly, personally taking images of beloved artworks is something that can allow people to remember their experiences in their mind long after the visit has ended, prolonging their relationship with an artwork.

Photographing an artwork also requires its own type of careful interaction; one must find the correct lighting, framing, and zoom. A person may choose a specific detail to focus on in a painting, magnifying it with their lens tenfold, or they might photograph a whole room. Photography like this could be argued to actually increase one's awareness of their surrounding, as they add an extra lens through which they are engaging with the space, and choosing their images wisely and for specific reasons.

Curators for a long time have been aware that people want more from a Gallery or Museum than to just look. They want to talk, feel, photograph, and yes, touch. But to make sure artworks are not damaged, touch continues to be restricted. Instead, more and more curators are attempting to find new ways to engage touch in the Gallery that does not include touching the actual artworks; sometimes exhibitions may feature replicas of artworks that *can* be touched, they may include buttons that play sound or turn on lights around artworks to add an additional layer of interactivity to a restricted work.

Engaging with sound has been popular for a while now in order to expand the Gallery experience to other senses. Audio guides are exceptionally popular, and they serve the dual purpose of also overcoming language and ability barriers, so a person's Gallery experience is not dependent on their country of origin or disability status. Directional sound can also be used, interweaving both audio and space to create a striking physical sensation. The audio itself can aid understanding, describe a work, give greater context to an exhibition, or just serve as ambient sound to transform the Gallery space into a whole new environment.

Another way curators may attempt to engage touch is through including replicas of an artwork alongside the real thing, as previously mentioned. Often times the replica is accompanied by a sign that enthusiastically asks the museum-goer to 'Please, Touch!'. Instead of a one-to-one replicas, however, some exhibitions include re-creations of certain garments or textiles featured in a painting in order to add another tactile layer to

**Fig. 3**





Some museum-goers, such as yourself, may visit a Gallery or Museum with their sketchbooks and watercolours to create a sensory proxy of an artwork. By drawing or painting an artwork frozen on a Gallery wall, looking is combined with feeling and creation, bringing the artwork into your own hands. This creates a unique type of tactile interaction with a work of art, where the viewer can touch the work and recreate is birth through the proxy of their own pencil and paper.

For example,

**Figure 2:** The Toilette, painted by Charles Robert Leslie in 1849.

**Figure 3:** The Toilette Experience. Here, it is rendered entirely through someone else's sketches; you are seeing the original through another's interpretation. Through this mediation of vision, mind, and hand, you can glean an understanding of the original painting's visual and symbolic qualities as experience personally by an individual.

This way of engaging with an artwork is another method of encouraging slow looking within yourself, discussed in the previous section of this guide. But it is not purely a visual exercise; when drawing from a reference, one's hands must trace the same lines of the same shapes in the original artwork. It is in this way that the work is reproduced with tactility; it's a clever way to feel an artwork without really feeling it.

This type of process is quite a common activity used in art courses; students will be assigned artworks to study and recreate, because the in-person analysis of an artwork in this way not only helps your physical experience in the Gallery, but also is a tried and tested method for improving artistic skill and technique. The Gallery space does not have to be simply a place of looking and nothing else, even with restricted access to touch. You may just have to adjust your understanding of what *feeling* can be, beyond reaching out and touching things with your hands.

There can also be an argument made that photographing artworks on your phone is also a uniquely tactile way of navigating the Museum. It has become commonplace to deride the use of cameras and phones in the Gallery, as many believe it shows a disconnect from one's environment or can

be disruptive and loud. It's true that a camera flash can be disruptive, but quietly, personally taking images of beloved artworks is something that can allow people to remember their experiences in their mind long after the visit has ended, prolonging their relationship with an artwork.

Photographing an artwork also requires its own type of careful interaction; one must find the correct lighting, framing, and zoom. A person may choose a specific detail to focus on in a painting, magnifying it with their lens tenfold, or they might photograph a whole room. Photography like this could be argued to actually increase one's awareness of their surrounding, as they add an extra lens through which they are engaging with the space, and choosing their images wisely and for specific reasons.

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Fig. 3





their commentary. This not only invites sensory engagement, but also invites comparative thinking.

One is encouraged by this method of curation to think about how textiles are rendered in paint or sculpture as opposed to the real thing, highlighting the difference between each medium and often times revealing the embellishments and level of attention to detail of an artist.

Many artists of old would use the painting or sculpting of textiles as a way to measure and show off their technical skill; the more detailed, more refined, and more realistically an artist can render a complicated garment, the better they were believed to be.

Rendering fabric naturalistically was a huge technical challenge, but also incredibly beautiful to behold. Some painted or sculpted fabrics are rendered so well, it may feel possible for the viewer to imagine their texture, the movement of the folds as the light shift. This, too, is a form of pseudo-tactile experience.

For example,

**Figure 3:** Mary Magdalene painted by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo between 1535 and 1540. The silver fabric is painted to delicately and strikingly that it comes alive. Reach out for yourself and touch it as it shimmers.

*Visual perception is interpretation and all senses play their part.*

- Simon Wyatt, Music in the Museum: Intangible Influences

Fig. 3









2.

# *How do you feel?*

There is another type of feeling that the Gallery or Museum may want you to partake in, and that is *emotional* feeling. Luckily for art institutions, this does not require physical touching of any kind. Instead, artworks find novel and interesting ways to create a spark within a person, whether that be a spark of beauty, joy, disgust, awe, outrage, sadness, understanding, or humour.

Plenty of artists and curators attempt to curate positive atmospheres and feelings through their works and exhibitions, such as an appreciation for beauty or for the achievement of humanity. These feelings can be very powerful, and when a person is struck emotionally by a particular work of art, it can stay with them for the rest of their lives.

However, for a lot of artists and curators it is much more about evoking an intensity of feeling rather than a specific feeling

itself; plenty of artists do not shy away from making the viewers of their work angry or upset or put-off. These emotions can also be very powerful, so finding ways to evoke them can make a truly meaningful experience that drives someone to make a change in their life or attitude.

It is beyond an artists control to completely anticipate what a viewer may feel when interacting with their works, though they may use techniques to facilitate a certain outcome.

For example,

**Figure 4:** Self Portrait painted by Beatrice Ancillotti Goretti c. 1900. The artist has painted herself intensely; her head seems to float in the centre of the canvas, her powerful gaze feels like it follows you as you move. Such a composition may unnerve, and make the viewer squirm.

Fig. 4





Other artworks may provoke feeling through a combination of incidental and intentional factors.

It is often times the combination of sensory elements with contextual information which makes an artwork so compelling and emotionally moving. The visual and sensory elements do the brunt work to communicate a message or feeling, taking from a vast history of visual culture and interactive considerations to do so. The contextual information elevates the work, places it within a timeframe and a 'canon', revealing to the viewer a depth they wouldn't be able to glean otherwise.

For example,

**Figure 5:** Take your Son, Sir! painted by Ford Madox Brown between 1851-56, incomplete. This painting is visually striking, unfinished and blindingly vivid. The woman stares right at us, pleadingly. A sad a sorrowful sight. The turmoil emanating from this work is elevated once you learn that the artist, Ford Madox Brown, experienced the death of his ten-month-old son during the painting of this work.

This type of contextual information is impossible to know on your own when you first come into the Gallery and interact with each work, and most artists anticipate this. They understand that they have to let the work stand on its own, so that the museum-goer can interact with any artwork in some capacity without a breadth of information. But at the same time, many artists want to expand upon their works and their meanings beyond the purely visual or sensory, and so may produce accompanying work or explanations to enlighten the viewer. They may add additional information to the back of the canvas or publish an essay or poem intended to expand the work's meaning. An exhibition curator may add specific contextual information to museum labels that they deem relevant to the work, but this information is often limited in length due to the small size of most gallery labels.

Another way that curators may convey context to the museum-goer is through exhibition themes, themed rooms, or narrative grouping of artworks together for other specific reasons. The work opposite is currently housed in the Tate Britain, and hangs on the wall of a room that is inhabited entirely by mid-18th century painters; Madox Brown's contemporaries, such as the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and other works by Madox

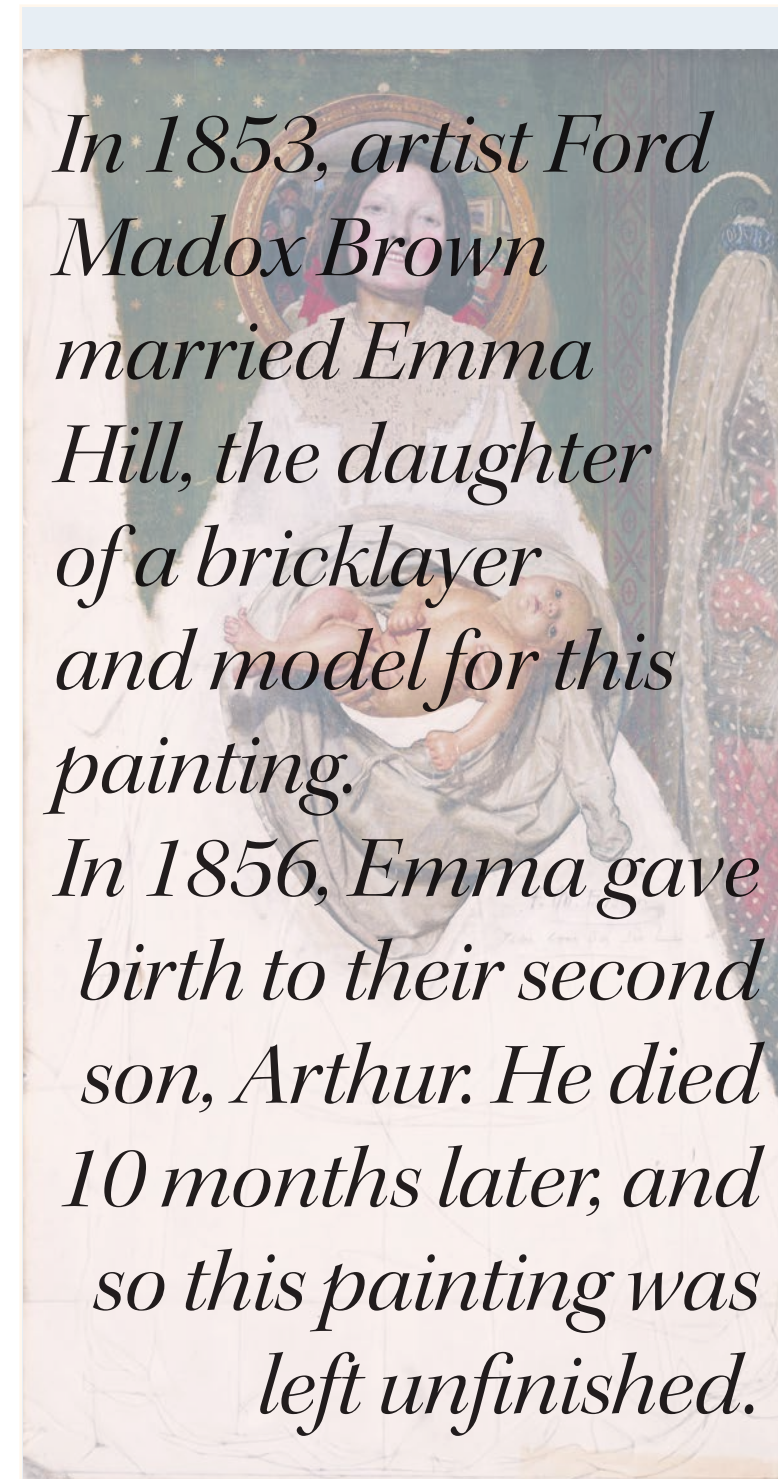
Brown himself. This grouping of artworks, confined to a relatively small group of people from a relatively short amount of time, creates an environment in which the museum-goer may learn to understand the artistic fashions of the time. The museum-goer sees the works in relation to one another, understanding that each artist was seeing these artworks within the same sphere as well. By stepping into this room, you are stepping into the art world of the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates, seeing the artworks as they would have also seen them in relation to one another. This grouping conveys environmental and historical context.

It is important, however, not to get lost in the provenance of an artwork and disregard its visual or sensory value entirely. When emotional interaction with art becomes too reliant on what information you know about the piece beforehand, art becomes an experience for the highly educated (and often wealthy) only, which excludes a large amount of people. Furthermore, for a very long period of time in art history, huge swathes of the population of every country were illiterate but still interacted with and loved art. This is particularly the case for religious art of the Middle Ages, which was wholly intended to be disseminated as far as possible with the express purpose of educating those who were not educated otherwise. This means many artists for a long time were operating on the presumption that their artworks would inevitably be encountered by people who would not have access to wider context, so they often crafted their artworks with this in mind.

In the contemporary era, though many more people are literate in art and art history, it can still feel intellectually daunting to enter the Gallery or Museum space due to the sheer mass of art that exists, and the impossibility of knowing basic information about all of it. Today more than ever there is an emphasis on accessibility within these spaces, and artists and curators continue to find new ways to communicate the meanings and experiences of their work to as many people as they can, despite however many barriers they may face.

Many a museum-goer, perhaps even yourself, may liken the emotional capabilities of art to a religious experience. Being moved by a painting may feel comparable to being filled with the Holy Spirit, or visited by an otherworldly force, such is the vitality of such an experience. Even the atheistic may feel this way, especially if an artwork bears significant similarities to an event or figure of one's own life. This almost spiritual

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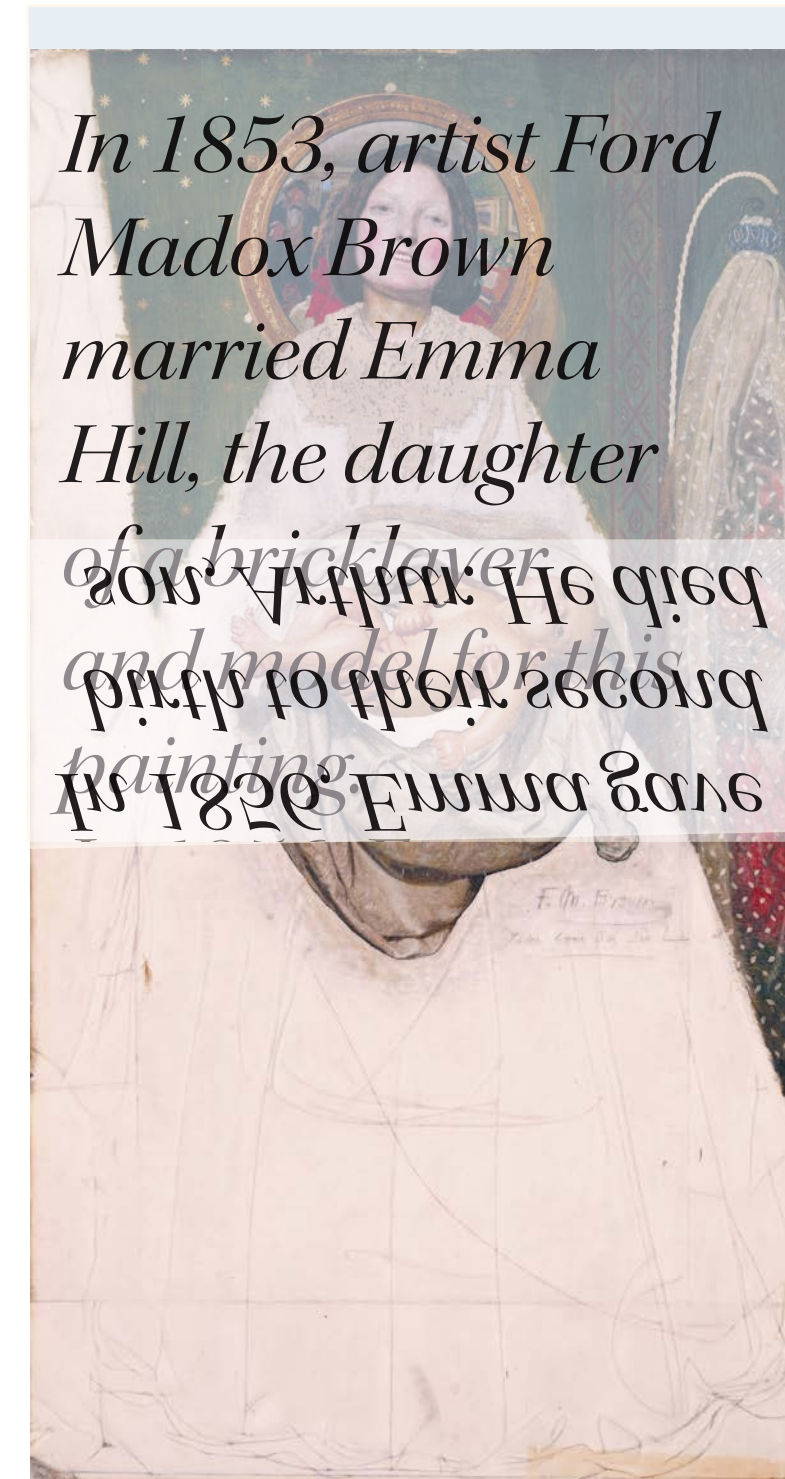
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Fig. 5





experience has roots in its literal extreme; the foundations of the Western art 'canon' lies in Christian religious art and artefacts.

Reliquary artefacts serve a dual purpose; to contain a holy relic, and to impose an atmosphere of spiritual glory and authority upon the viewer. The relics themselves are never particularly visually impressive, and so it is the role of the reliquary to be artistically impressive, so that the true spiritual beauty and importance of the relic is properly communicated.

These reliquaries can still evoke feelings of spiritual connectedness and emotional importance to this day, and many religious people still venerate the holy relics and find them deeply moving. The atheistic viewer may also feel an emotional impact, being so close to an artefact of distinct historical importance and religious corporeality.

For example,

**Figure 6:** Reliquary of the Finger of John the Baptist, attributed to Matteo di Giovanni, crafted between 1416-26. The gold construction of this piece is beautiful and intricate, but the true power of this work lies in the relic. This finger touched Christ, and for the museum-goer it is as close as they may corporeally get to God in their lifetime.

*One would do better to think of the museum as a theatre in which a participating public is central.*

*- Christina Grammatikopoulou,  
Breathing Art*

Fig. 6

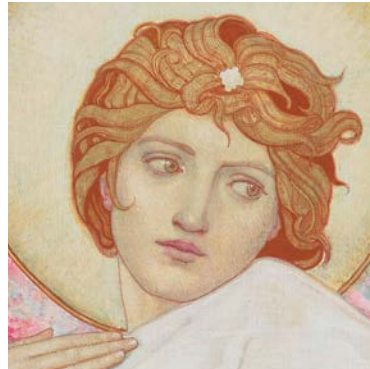




# Ask yourself:

What is around me? And how does that affect what is inside me?

What can I feel, hear, smell, and touch?



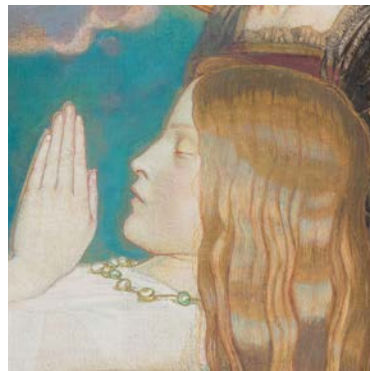
Why do I feel the way I do?

What does the artist want me to feel?

How do they tell me this?

How do I move through the Gallery?

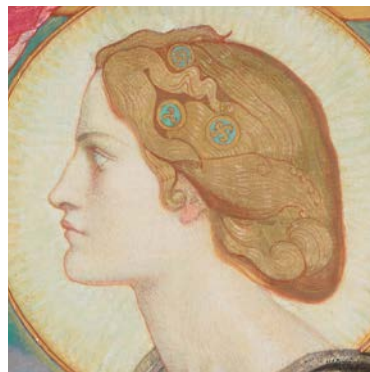
How do I move through space in relation to the artworks I am perceiving?



What activities do I partake in as part of my visit?

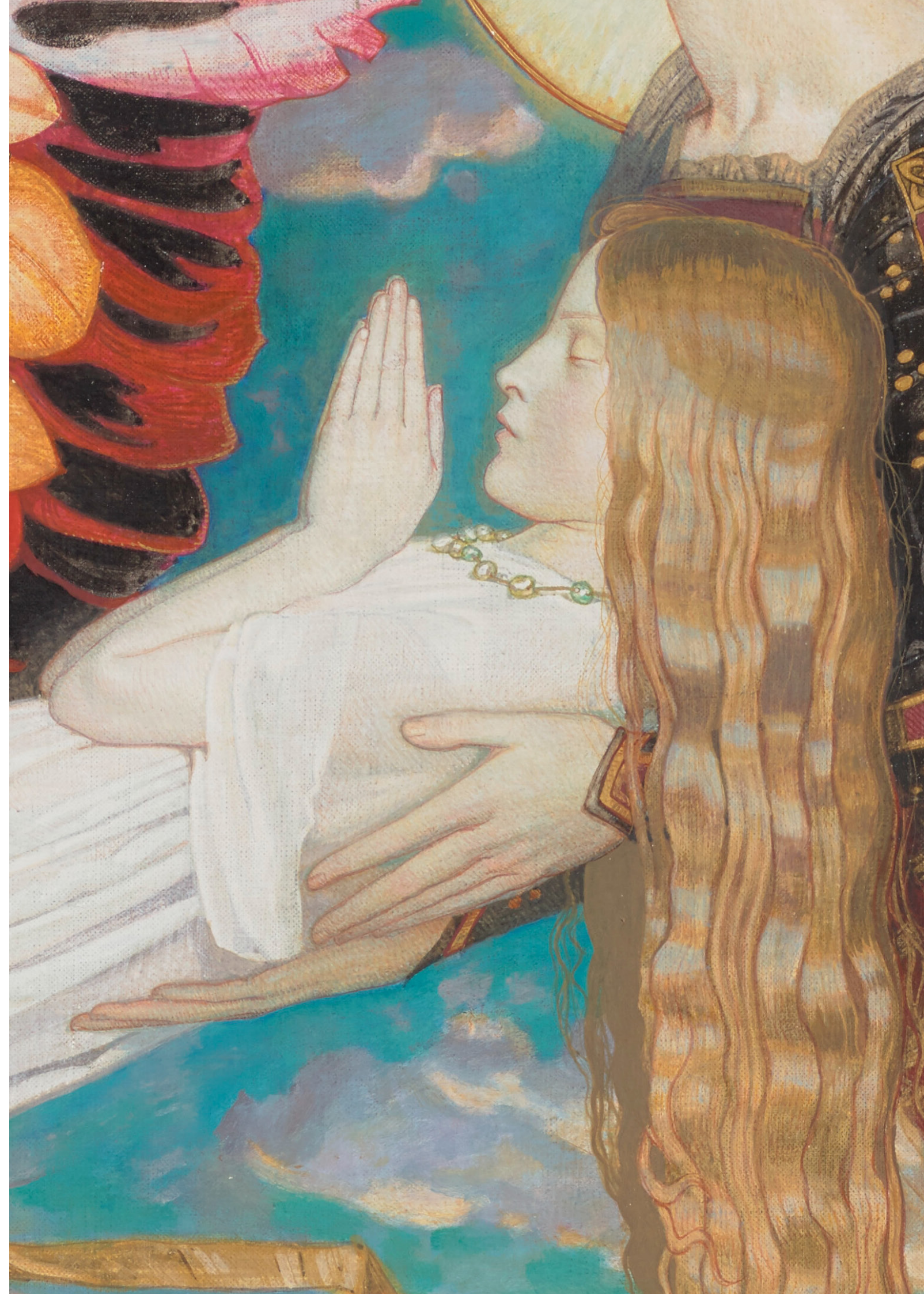
How do these activities change the way my senses feel the space around me?

You can find your thoughts and feelings enhanced by the space you're in and the unique ways a work of art may call out to you and engage your focus.



You do not need to touch to be able to feel.

*Inner covers:*  
Saint Bride, detail, John Duncan, 1910.







COMPANION FOR THE MUSEUM-GOER

part three

# THINKING



*How do we imagine, contextualise, and deconstruct art?*

Examples taken exclusively from works the author,  
Kit Moran, has visited in person.



1.

# The Long Game

It can take an very long time to create a work of art. Sculptures can require months of hand-chiselling, performance pieces can span weeks, and oil paintings can take just as long to dry as they do to compose. When an artist is spending so much time on every little detail, many will imbue their works with carefully-considered symbolism and structure to encode a narrative beyond words.

Within religious art, many artists may rely on pre-established symbols to craft their narratives. The history of Christian painting, for example, spans centuries and, as discussed earlier, a lot of this history saw huge swathes of the population illiterate. This made symbolism thrive in order to convey biblical or apocryphal stories to those who could not read them otherwise. Over time, these symbols became commonplace, repeated over and over again so that they became second-nature to those who attended churches on a regular basis and interacted with this

art. Today, study of symbolism of all kinds is called 'semiotics'. Noticing and decoding symbolism within art can feel quite like a game or puzzle for one to complete while moving through the Gallery space.

Religious symbolism is not the only type of symbolism however, and many artists will use carefully-placed objects, animals, or poses to call upon a viewer's cultural memory to tell a story.

For example,

**Figure 1:** The Ambassadors, painted by Hans Holbein the Younger in 1533. This painting is considered one of the most cryptic and detailed in the National Gallery, a status owed to its careful detail, myriad of religious and secular symbols, and its striking surreal skull imagery.

Fig. 1





Paintings that are not explicitly religious may still use religious imagery to call upon a culturally understood meaning or story, because religion is so heavily embedded within cultural identity. These symbols vary greatly between religions and cultures; for example, in Islamic art symbolism is primarily floral and nature-based, because within Islamic art history figural depictions within art has not been widely practiced or accepted. Certain sects of Christianity have also strayed away from figural depiction within art at certain periods of time, based on the belief that worshipping ‘idols’ is a type of blasphemy. This is often known as ‘Iconoclasm’.

Not all artists use detailed symbolism in their works, however. At the turn of the 19th century in England, an artistic and literary movement emerged known as Aestheticism, which was based on the motto ‘art for art’s sake’, or ‘l’art pour l’art’ in French. These artists and writers, including famed author and playwright Oscar Wilde, believed in the primacy of art’s beauty and visual appeal above its ability to tell a story or convey a moral. These artists and writers focused much less on the symbolic content of their works in favour of their ability to to be beautiful. This does not mean they disregarded symbolism altogether, but they chose to put less emphasis on its narrative value.

At the other end of the spectrum lies art movements and collectives such as the Pre-Raphaelites. These artists, who emerged in England several decades before the Aesthetes, places immense emphasis on symbolism and narrative within an artwork, so much so that they often dedicated additional time to writing essays or poems to explain the symbolism within their works to the average museum-goer of the time. The paintings of these artists could be religious, historical, or literary in subject, but were united in their symbolic value and in their focus on nature as an arbiter of truth and beauty. What resulted was a collection of immensely detailed, clearly, and almost hyper-real artworks that forced the viewer to look slowly, think carefully, and call upon a vast range of cultural symbols and stories to understand the moral being communicated by the artist.

For example,

**Figure 2:** The Awakening Conscience, painted by William Holman Hunt in 1853. Holman Hunt was part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and this artwork serves as

key insight into the symbolic and visual goals of the art collective. The painting is filtered through a lens of hyper-reality, with an intense clarity of detail that helps render its overwhelming saturation of symbolism. Look closely, and see if you can decode what Holman Hunt is trying to say with this painting.

Neither the Aesthetes or the Pre-Raphaelites crafted the ‘correct’ way to think about art. In fact, there is no such thing as the ‘correct’ way to understand art; it is something that is up to you, the museum-goer, and your understanding of culture, history, and visual appeal. What one viewer may find moving and meaningful in an artwork, another may find vulgar and insipid. Many people find this lack of concrete solution or immutable answer to art disturbing, daunting, or pointless, which dissuades them from thinking about art altogether. Many people believe they do not have the knowledge, and therefore the authority, to interpret art intelligently or in a way that is worth listening to. But museum-goer, it is important to remember that many artists past, present, and future, are completely understanding of this fact. They try their best to communicate their meanings, but part of creating a piece of art requires the understanding that the viewer will interpret it however they want, and it is not up to the artist to entirely dictate that.

Many artists anticipate an audience that will not understand the deeply personal or academic meaning behind their works, and so choose to focus on encouraging the viewer to find their own meanings within the visual or sensory input. Some artists keep the meanings of their symbolism entirely to themselves. Some artists’ explanations of their works are lost to time, and so therefore will never be understood in the present day as they once were.

But this is not necessarily a negative thing. Without solid rules or guidelines, the meaning of artworks can constantly change over time, which keeps them constantly interesting and constantly meaningful. This transmutation cannot be prevented, and it is part of the intrigue of art, the Gallery, and the Museum space. Diversity of viewpoint and understanding, is a vital component of what makes thinking about art so valuable and so rewarding. So, museum-goer, it is important that you do not fret over the perceived value - or lack thereof - of your opinions on art. An academic background is not a necessary prerequisite to thinking about art, and your opinion

Fig. 2





is not necessarily less valuable or less desirable because of your lack of contextual understanding. It is impossible for even the most learned art historian to know everything about all artworks, and so we all experience some level of amateur understanding when in the Gallery space. It's in this way that such spaces can serve as an intellectual equaliser.

You can still find meaning in an artwork's symbolism, even if you don't have an academic background in the area. Mirrors, for example, are a common symbol in artworks, often intended to encourage a viewer to think about perspective, reflection, and identity. There is much theoretical conversation in literature about the symbolism of the mirror, which can help explain to someone why it is such a popular illusionary and introspective symbol. But it can also be easily understood without this background, even if it is on a slightly more superficial level. The average viewer may still understand that a mirror can symbolise different versions of the same thing, or a consideration of vanity and identity. These are meanings embedded within modern visual culture, impossible to escape and easy to recall.

For example,

**Figure 3:** A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, painted by Édouard Manet in 1882. This work of Impressionism seems confusing at first, with a warped perspective. But by looking closer, it becomes clear that the main attraction of the piece is that large mirror in the back, reflecting the extensive bustle and chaos of the environment in its own, distorted way.

*Mirrors are the instruments of a universal magic that converts things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another and another into myself.*

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*

Fig. 3



Legs of a trapeze artist

Is this a mirror? Or the real background?

Is the painting from this man's perspective?

Bottles resemble the lady's dress: objectification

Surrounded by objects of consumption, the barmaid becomes one herself







2.

# *Who's afraid of critical theory?*

This is not to say, however, that an academic understanding of art somehow hinders the cognitive experience of the Gallery. For the museum-goer who *is* interested in expanding their historical and cultural understanding of art, critical theory can be an important place to start.

Often times, the language used by popular art theorists and academics can be a considerable obstacle, especially if the theoretical explanation was written before the 21st century. Language changes, understanding of culture changes, and common references or popular literature from before our time may be lost on the modern reader. But once this obstacle is overcome, either through peer discussion, summary explanations, or dedicated deciphering, the information that is being explained is often incredibly valuable.

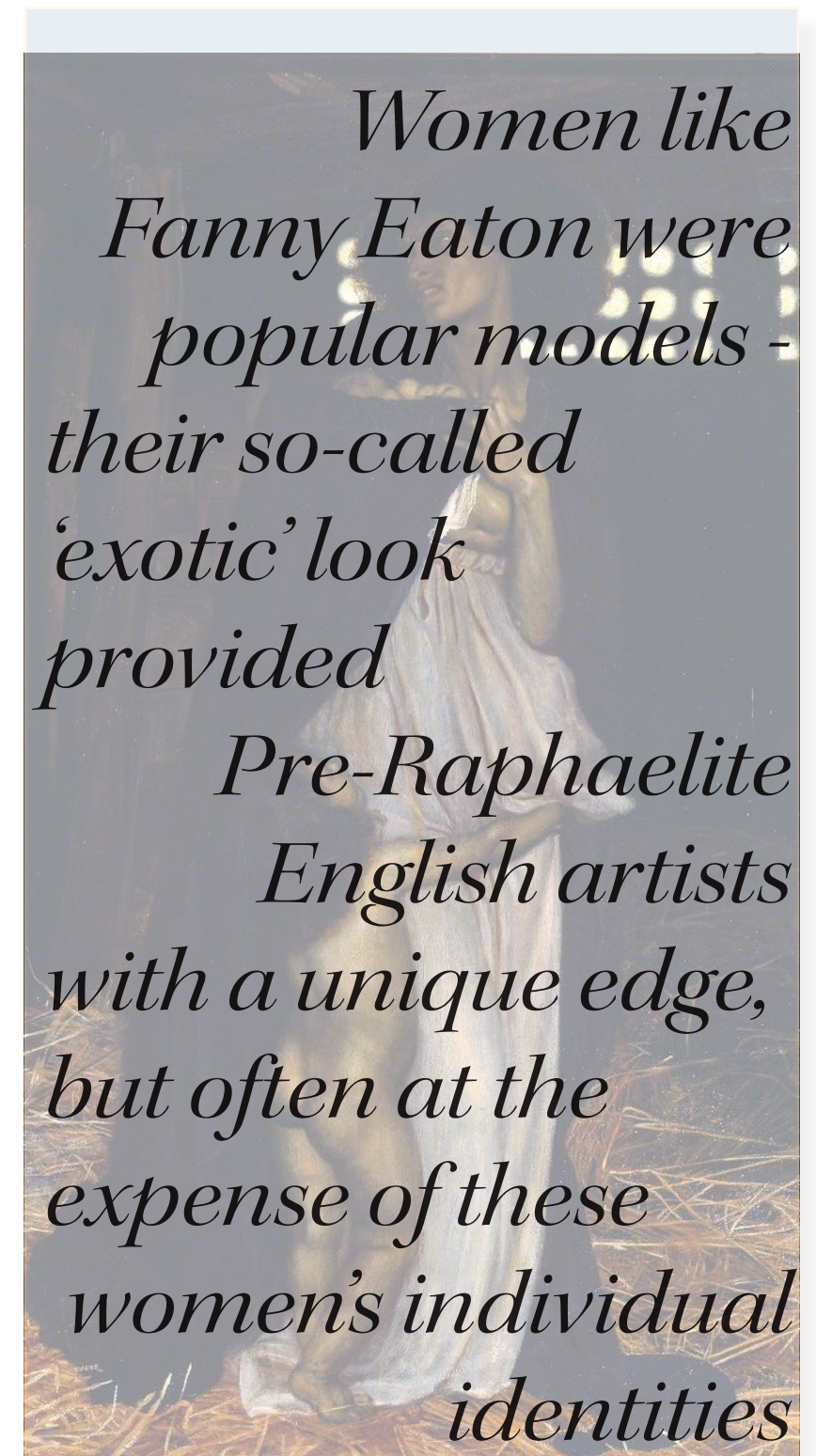
In today's academic world, there are common recurring sociological focuses that pop up again and again in art historical

writing. One of these focuses is race; as a social construct, as informed by biological factors, and as rendered in art from a pre-colonial, imperial, post-colonial, and de-colonial lens.

For example,

**Figure 4:** Jochebed with Moses and Miriam, painted by William Blake Richmond c.1865. This painting features Jamaican model Fanny Eaton as a central figure. The decision to cast a woman with Black African features as a biblical figure, the mother of Moses, is a unique choice for the time period, but is not necessarily universally progressive. Casting Black models at this time did bring Black features into the Western art 'canon' in a powerful and moving way, but it was also linked to a phenomenon called Orientalism, which saw artists seek out 'exotic' looking models because they valued the way they look in an objectified, often Imperialist way.

Fig. 4





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COMPANION FOR THE MUSEUM-GOER

WHO'S AFRAID OF CRITICAL THEORY?

Fig. 4





Race is a central focus of what is referred to as Orientalist art; art that predominantly depicts scenes of life in the Orient (a vague, generally variable part of the world that usually encompasses parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East) in a way that mystifies them, beautifies them, denigrates them, and fictionalises them for the pleasure and consumption of the museum-goer at the Imperial core. This type of painting was particularly popular in 18th century France, partially due to France's own colonial territories but also due to the loss of areas that *used* to be their territories.

The Orientalist vision, as described by theorists such as Edward Said and Linda Nochlin, is not concerned with objective reality, but rather with presenting stereotyped visions of the Orient as if they were reality. This leads to paintings that feature extreme violence or lasciviousness such paintings of 'harems' or 'slave markets' that are exaggerated or entirely made up by people who never had access to these spaces, or paintings that treat their human subjects as ethnographic studies, using them as examples of 'savagery' in order to fuel the ideological fires of White Supremacy.

For example,

**Figure 5:** The Hhareem, Cairo, painted by John Frederick Lewis, c.1850. This painting supposedly depicts a harem, which is comprised of women devoted to an officer of high rank. In reality, however, this scene is entirely fictionalised, as real harems in Cairo and similar areas were women-only spaces that a man like Lewis would not have been permitted to enter. What is more likely is that Lewis painted this work based on a fictionalised story he read in sensationalist literature. He also based many of his female figures on his English wife, rather than choosing to paint women from Cairo in these scenes, which further illuminates their staging.

It is through study of subjects such as these that the political vitality and significant ideological influence art can harbour becomes even clearer. The Gallery and Museum in itself becomes a political arena, showcasing these distinctly propagandised works of art to the average museum-goer who may not know any better, and therefore may accept the fictionalised account of the Orient that these artists present as the true reality of life in these areas. Indeed, often times it was the goal of Orientalist artists to achieve just that; they

purposefully pursued an incredibly lifelike and realistic style of painting in order to convince the viewer that what they were seeing was, indeed, real.

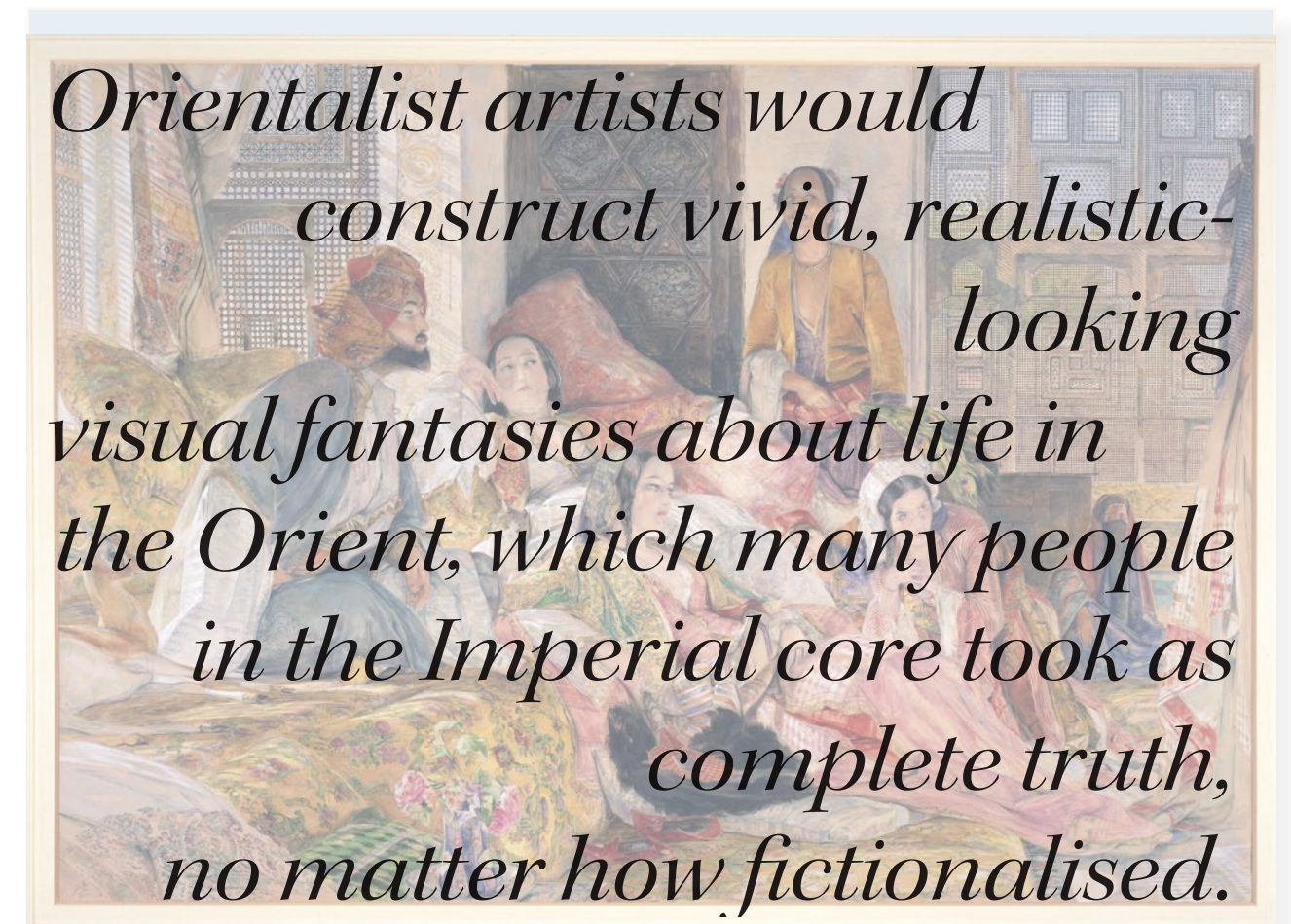
But sociological considerations in art theory do not stop there. Gender and sex, particularly focusing on women, is also a very common and important feature of art historical study. The female body is one of the most commonly depicted figures in art, especially the nude female body, where the nude male body is depicted much less often. Inversely, in the Western art 'canon', most known and famous artists are male. This disparity reflects the long and complex history of misogyny around the world as represented in visual culture. Women are the objects to be painted, venerated for their looks at the same time they are devalues for their skills. Men, on the other hand, are the beholders and therefore the arbiters of art, and by extension beauty.

There are consistent efforts in the modern era to deconstruct this worldview, through art and through literature about art. Museum and Gallery spaces today continue to take steps towards this by seeking out information about female artists and staging exhibitions about them and their works. There is also considerable attention paid in Western Gallery and Museum spaces towards colonial history, and many exhibitions today spend deliberate time exploring the links between artworks and colonial violence, including slavery. Previously, these areas of art history were ignored because they were deemed unsightly or insulting to Western art sensibilities. But today, it is generally understood that one must face the realities of the past head on, no matter how unpleasant, if one is attempting to truly understand the course of art history.

Art theory today is also increasingly interested in the digital sphere, and in how technology has advanced (or perhaps prevented) the progression of the practice and study of art. Many artists today like to create works that only exist in the digital world, pushing the boundaries of interaction and meaning.

However, in our increasingly digital world, any exploration of technological or mechanical aspects of the art world can quickly become outdated as technology becomes faster, vaster, and much more of a significant staple in our everyday lives. This is where some theorists, such as the previously mentioned John Berger, have fallen short over the years, as these authors

Fig. 5





Race is a central focus of what is referred to as Orientalist art; art that predominantly depicts scenes of life in the Orient (a vague, generally variable part of the world that usually encompasses parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East) in a way that mystifies them, beautifies them, denigrates them, and fictionalises them for the pleasure and consumption of the museum-goer at the Imperial core. This type of painting was particularly popular in 18th century France, partially due to France's own colonial territories but also due to the loss of areas that *used* to be their territories.

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be expected to predict the future but are still nonetheless easily disproven or discarded by the time the newest version of computer or mobile phone is disseminated to the public.

Furthermore, artists who attempt to use technology as a medium may see their artworks swiftly shift in meaning as the technology they use quickly ages. What was once cutting-edge material may be considered old-school in five years time, changing the reception of the artwork entirely to the technologically-minded museum-goer.

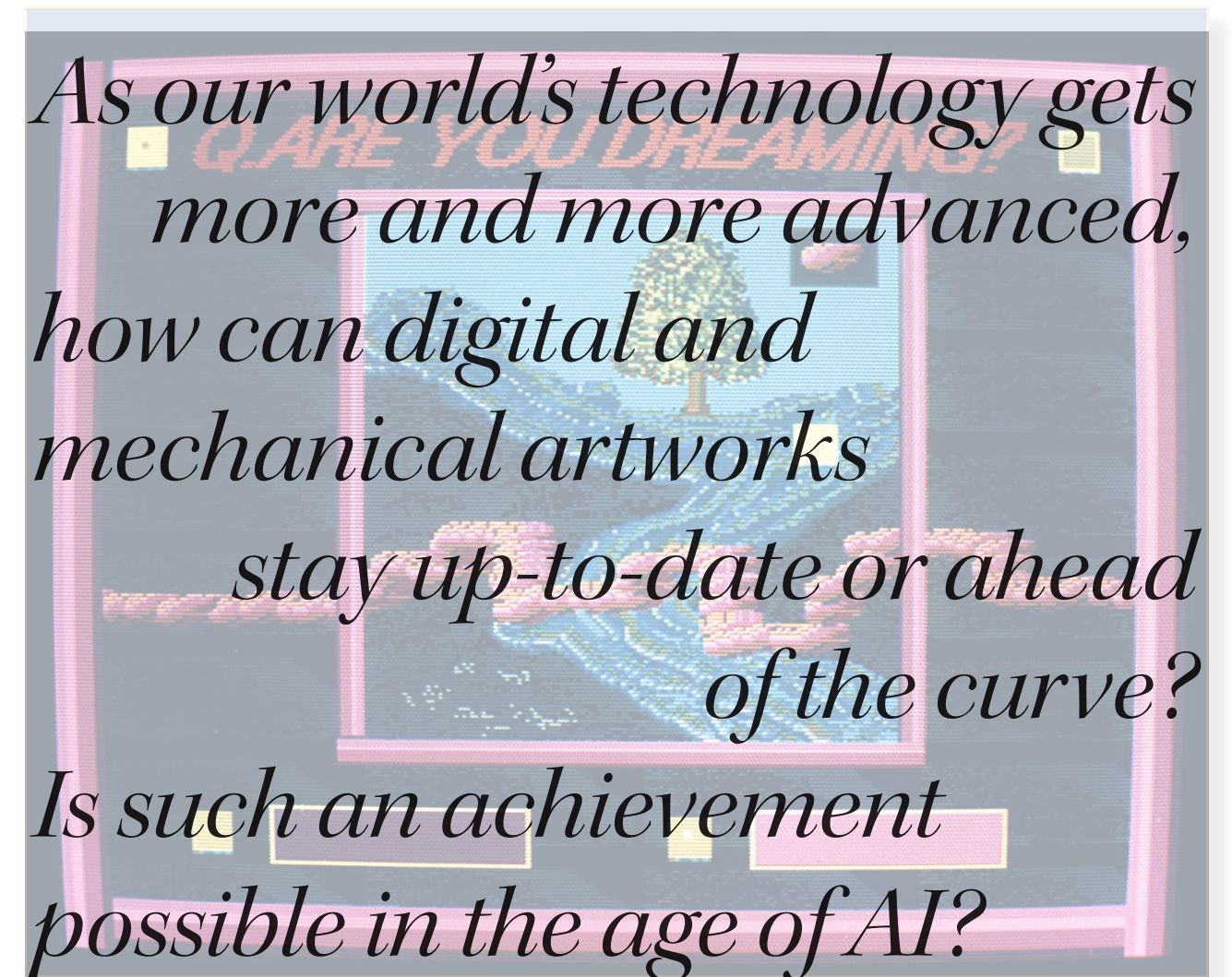
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**Figure 6:** Fictional Videogame Still/Are You Dreaming? created by Suzanne Treister between 1991-92. This artwork was created not too long after the birth of the internet, and far before realistic video game graphics were developed. At the time, these graphics would be considered rather contemporary, but today they looked entirely old-school and aged, and so they speak differently to today's viewer.

*Part of the strategy of an Orientalist painter {...} is to make his viewers forget that there was any "bringing into being" at all, to convince them that works like these were simply "reflections," scientific in their exactitude, of a pre-existing Oriental reality.*

*- Linda Nochlin, The Imaginary Orient (The Politics of Vision)*

Fig. 6





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# *Closing Thoughts*

Museum-goer, now that you have read this rather introductory guide to looking, feeling, and thinking about art, it is imperative that you take what you have learnt at carry with you back into the Gallery and Museum space.

Now, when you visit artworks in their permanent or temporary homes, think about what you're seeing, how you're seeing it, where you're seeing it, why you're seeing it, and what that experience makes you feel.

Think about your physical presence in relation to the space, and think about what you can hear, touch, or smell as you encounter a new exhibition. Think about how the room changes around you, and how that changes you as well.

Think about your emotional response, or lack thereof, even if it is a negative one. Consider why you respond this way, what in the artwork triggered such a response, and what art can mean

to you if you let it make an impact on your point of view.

Think about thinking, and about how many people before you have had the exact same questions and queries you have today, even a few centuries ago. And if you are so inclined, embark online or to your local library or bookstore and navigate your way to the art theory or criticism section, so that you can begin your own journey of finding the answers you're looking for.

And think about the digital world in relation to the physical, as it seems that technology is not going to slow down any time soon. Consider space as a physical reality and a mechanical one, and about how all of that manifests in art.

Lastly, consider your own opinion as one worth listening to, as one worth cultivating and supporting. You do not need permission to interpret art, you just need an honest curiosity.



*Inner covers:*  
Supper at Emmaus, detail, Caravaggio, 1601.





