

Audley Webster Memorial Essay Competition

Seeking Understanding at the Lowe

Joseph D. Broehl

Abstract:

This essay explores the ideas of John Berger and Jeanette Winterson, found in the respective works *Ways of Seeing* and *Art Objects*, in tandem with personal experiences at the Lowe Art Museum, as well as an analysis of the Giovanni Paolo Panini's art work titled, *A Capriccio of Classical Ruins with Christ Healing the Lame at the Pool of Bethesda*. The exploration of Berger and Winterson's ideas, found within this essay, is structured as a first-person point of view journey and a "conversation" with Panini's work.

Keywords: John Berger, Jeanette Winterson, *Ways of Seeing*, *Art Objects*, Lowe Art Museum, art experts, Giovanni Paolo Panini

Something was chasing me. Something was following me. From the moment I walked through the double glass doors of the Lowe Art Museum, this unknown presence haunted me. Walking to the white front desk of the Lowe, I was greeted by two bubbly women, but still – something seemed to taunt me, like a weight on my shoulders. I shrugged it off, it was probably just nerves (for some reason). I dropped my bag off my shoulders and swung it gently onto the cool, white marble flooring, just as the women at the desk asked me to. With a final smile, I swiftly turned to the grandeur of the first exhibit – the Ben Tobin Galleries of Modern and Contemporary Art -- and began my journey into the museum filled with mysteries.

I crept through the first art exhibit, with some reluctance; because of my discomfort, I decided to take a quick walk-through all the exhibits, not really looking at anything in particular, but getting my bearings, all the while, making mental notes of exhibits and pieces that happened to catch my eye. After my first attempt through the museum, I returned once more to the first exhibit, making sure to give a little smile to the women at the desk, to assure them (and myself) that I knew what I was doing. Upon my second journey through the Tobin Gallery, I was once again filled with the indeterminate fear and anxiety that I felt from the moment I entered the museum; however, this time I was much more aware of the explosion of color around me, as well as the stoicism of the people scattered throughout the exhibit. The grandeur of the Tobin gallery is due in part to its openness, with rays of sunlight illuminating the entire room through the many glass windows and ceilings that seemed to touch the heavens, making me feel as if I was in some modern art version of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. Walking through the Tobin gallery, feeling so much pressure in such an open space, I could not help but think about how awkward I felt, how naked I was, surrounded by such great masterpieces – like a mere mortal among gods;

both the actual works of art and some of the people who seemed to be experts, knowing exactly what to look for and how to find it, made me feel so out of place -- perhaps this was the haunting presence around me.

I tried to walk with silence, breathing slowly, careful not to make a sound – the Lowe was not simply an art museum, it was a place for the worthy to go, to worship – a church, just as John Berger discusses in his work, *Ways of Seeing*. It was at this point, I was first reminded of Berger's words, "The majority of the population do not visit art museums. [...] The majority take it as axiomatic that the museums are full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes them: the mystery of unaccountable wealth. Or, to put this another way, they believe that original masterpieces belong to the preserve (both materially and spiritually) of the rich," (110). It seemed that everyone around me knew what they were doing, that they somehow had gained the right to be there – that they had passed some sort of test, or had a clear-cut understanding of everything around them – "truth" seemed to scream at me, "They are experts"; never in my mind did I think that they were just ordinary people, like me, who just wanted to enjoy a day at the art museum because they fit in. They had passed the test, they knew the "art expert stance," and were dressed in (proper) business attire, much nicer than my plain red t-shirt and beige shorts. Just as Berger discusses thoroughly, art museums have been "claimed" by the upper class and are designed, in every way, to uphold that; and I was feeling this first-hand, feeding my own doubts of "worthiness."

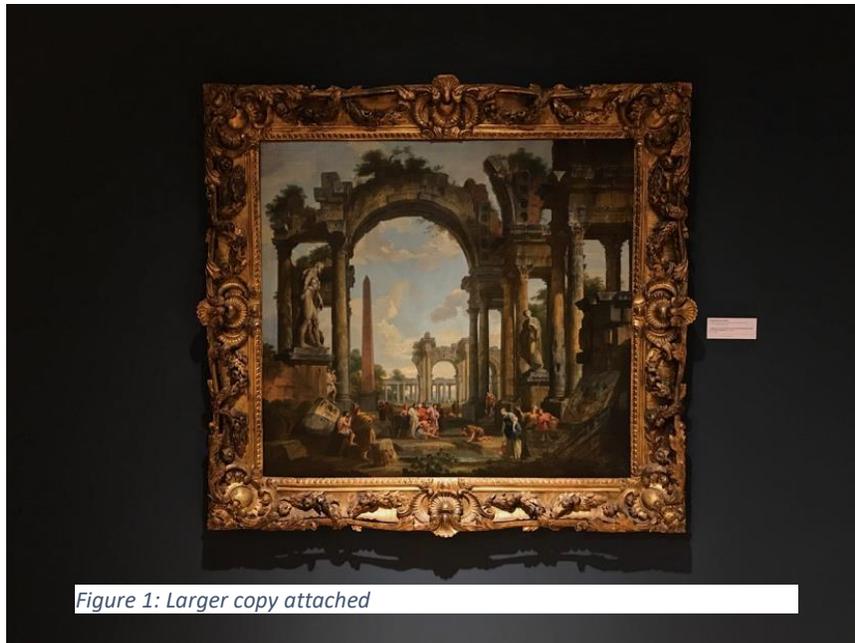
I decided that in order to find the perfect piece to study, I first studied the "art experts" around me. I picked the closest art expert I could find -- a woman wearing a black blazer and pencil skirt, with matching shoes and glasses -- I attempted to mimic everything about her, in hopes to learn how to pass as an art expert, someone worthy of being there: her stance, the way

she walked, how she scrutinized the painting in front of her, everything. I decided that I needed to try out my newly acquired “How to be an art expert” crash-course knowledge. I looked to my right and found a piece of modern art that spanned, almost, the entire wall. I decided to approach it, with all its different colors and textures, made from both neon lights and metal cans, all used in such a way that it depicted the same word (that for some reason was illegible to me). I decided to approach, debating whether or not I needed to bow before it, and assumed the “art expert stance”: I stuck my left leg forward, bent it at the knee, shifted my weight on my right hip, and crossed my arms. I let my eyes drift across the piece of art, following the grooves, the twists, turns, textures, various colors and shapes, waiting for something to happen, for something to scream at me, “HEY! LOOK HERE!”; to my dismay, nothing happened, the church-silence of the Lowe Art Museum remained undisturbed.

Ready to find the perfect piece of art, as a newly-christened art expert, I continued through the glass exhibit (with the geometrically exotic shapes of color and light), through the Asian and African art gallery (with all of its vases, statues, and scrolls), through the Native American collection (with totems and hand-made garments), and found myself in the photography section of the Lowe Art Museum, the walls lined with black and white photographs of famous celebrities, anyone from Martin Luther King Jr. to Humphrey Bogart; yet, not a single one of these celebrities spoke to me. Frustrated at the fact that I was nearing the end of the museum and had not fallen in love with any of the art pieces I had seen so far, and haunted by that same feeling of dread I had felt from the moment I stepped into the museum, the walls of the museum seemed to scream at me Jeanette Winterson’s words from *Art Objects*, “Experiencing paintings as moving pictures, out of context, disconnected, jostled, over-literary, with their endless accompanying explanations, over-crowded, one against the other, room on room, does

not make it easy to fall in love. Love takes time,” (8). Although I had not been in the museum for too long, only about half an hour at this point, my frustration grew as I felt no connection to any of the artwork there so far. Perhaps, I was not taking the time I needed to experience the museum and connect with the pieces housed within it; maybe I was rushing something that cannot be rushed. Alas, I continued my search.

Passing by each of the most notable celebrities from the past century, I felt as if the walls were closing in on me. As I strolled through the silent room, scolded by each celebrity I passed, I thought I would never find what I was looking for. Nearing the end of the section, a glint of sunshine reflected off of a set of double glass doors, blinding me – could this be the light at the end of this excruciatingly long tunnel? Hopeless, I tugged open the, almost weightless, doors and entered the room. All the light in the room seemed to be consumed by the shadows that traced its walls. The dark, oak-wood floors, along with the forest green and dense blue walls, added to the (already) ominous atmosphere of the room. At first, I honestly was not even sure if there were



any paintings on the walls, as the dim lighting and dull colors of the room ate the contents of the frames.

Finally, there it was, in all its glory. The ornate, gold frame called to me, as if to say, “Here I am.” Situated alone on the navy-blue wall of the Renaissance and Baroque gallery, sat the king of kings: the perfect piece of art. It called to me. It demanded to be heard. And I was destined to answer to its call. As Berger discovered, so too did I discover, “Yet this seeing which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli. [...] We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice,” (98). Somehow, I knew that this was the piece of art I was desperately searching for. While on my journey, venturing throughout the museum, I was never truly looking at the art because nothing really caught my eye. This masterpiece, however, grabbed my attention, it demanded it, and I chose to give it my full attention.

I read the tiny, helpful white plaque seated to the right of the painting. It read:

GIOVANNI PAOLO PANINI

b. 1691, Piacenza, Duchy of Parma, Holy Roman Empire

d. 1765, Rome, Papal States

A Capriccio of Classical Ruins with Christ Healing the Lame at the Pool of Bethesda, not dated

oil on canvas

Courtesy of L. Accorsi Family Collection

The men and women, in the painting, adorned with garments that seemed to resemble togas of various colors (from red to blue to yellow to white), went about their day-to-day lives. These specks of color roamed freely about the landscape, among the architectural amazements of the enormous statues, wondrous pillars, glorious arches: washing their clothes, filling buckets

with water, gossiping, hanging out, relaxing with friends, etc.. Looking at the scene, I was enthralled with wonder. Where was this place? What era was this? Who are these statues of? Who are these people? The more I examined the painting, the more I was “in” it, the more “connected” I was to the people in it, the more I was determined find answers to my questions.

Working up the courage to ask Giovanni’s art for answers, I finally asked, “Where does this scene take place.” With a sarcastic, challenging attitude the painting responded, “The Classical Ruins at the Pool of Bethesda.” Unsatisfied with the answer it had given me, I began examining the details of the piece. My eyes were first drawn to the architecture of the building in the background and of the ruins. With Roman-styled pillars and arches, I ventured the guess that it takes place somewhere within the Roman Empire; however, the painting gave me a vague response. Continuing my scrutiny, my eyes were drawn to the brooding marble man and gentle marble woman. Engaging in a dialogue with the painting, I thought out-loud, analyzing the statues, how they looked, the faces they are making, what they are doing, the clothing they are wearing, everything. After careful deliberation, I asked the painting if they were Grecian or Roman; yet again, I was confronted with opposition, as the painting countered my conclusions by pointing out the obelisk, in the middle-ground. I pensively stated, “Well that’s Egyptian... but I’m not completely sure if those are hieroglyphs on the base... I mean, they definitely look like them, but then again I’m not completely sure.” To this, the painting responded, in a way that makes me think I was (finally) growing on him, “What if they’re Hebrew?”

At this point both I and the painting realized that Giovanni Panini did this deliberately, that he purposely included all different types of styles, which were distinct to different empires, in order to showcase the world during this time, and help the audience understand where exactly this painting was showcasing. It was as if Winterson was working in conjunction with Panini:

The true artist is connected. The true artist studies the past, not as a copyist or a pasticheur will study the past, those people are only interested in the final product, the art object, signed, sealed, and delivered to a public drugged on reproduction. [...] If the true artist is connected, then he or she has much to give us because it is connection that we seek. Connection to the past, to one another, to the physical world, still compelling, in spite of the ravages of technology. (12-13)

Perhaps Panini used his knowledge of the past in order to depict this scene; he needed to understand the extent of the Roman empire, and the power of Egyptian influence. Upon giving up on trying to figure out where the Pool of Bethesda is, from the painting itself, I later discovered that it is located in Jerusalem: which makes a lot of sense why Panini incorporated all of these different styles and cultures, since so many different empires have occupied and influenced the city of Jerusalem. As Winterson said, the true artist needs to be connected to the world around them, and of the past – and Giovanni Paolo Panini did just that.

Continuing my conversation with the piece of art, my focus shifted to trying to figure out what exactly was going on in the painting. Together, the painting and I examined and talked about the people within the scene. By looking at the various groups of people in the scene, the clothes they were wearing, what they were doing, etc. contributed to what was going on. Focusing on the women in the foreground, are dressed in bright, dyed clothes (such as reds, oranges, blues, and yellows), we determined (through our conversation) that they had some kind of wealth, because dyed clothes were much more expensive than they are today; however, at the same time, we were not sure if they were middle- or upper-class women. Like all the other groups of people in the painting, the women were gawking at and gossiping about the only man dressed in rags. In an extensive back and forth, together, the painting and I determined that the

man in rags is in fact, the "Lame that Christ was there to heal". Coming to that conclusion, the painting and I discussed why they would be staring at him, gossiping about him; we determined that, "He is an Outsider." It was at this point that I truly felt like I was a part of the painting, like I was there, at the ruins. As Berger puts it, "When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it. If we 'saw' the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history. When we are prevented from seeing it, we are being deprived of the history which belongs to us," (100).

My experience at the Lowe Art Museum and with Panini's painting left me with, not only alleviation from my discomfort of being in the museums (where "only" art experts and the wealthy belong) a lot to think about, especially in regard to John Berger and Jeanette Winterson's writings about art. For me, just as Jeanette Winterson thought, "I am sure that if as a society we took art seriously, not as mere decoration or entertainment, but as a living spirit, we should very soon learn what is art and what is not art," (Winterson 17). Through my journey at the Lowe Art Museum, I have, as Winterson said, gained a new understanding and appreciation for art. For me, and Winterson, art is so much more than just colors on a canvas, it is even so much more than just the painting itself: it is about the entire experience of going to the museum, venturing through the exhibits, examining the painting and conversing with it, and it is even about what one thinks about and does after they leave. And, like Berger, after this experience, I understand that art is for everyone, and it is not just for the wealthy, educated, "art experts" as I once thought. As Berger puts it, and what my experience at the museum backs up, "In the end, the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms," (100). Just as Berger explains, the wealthy minority have transformed art museums into something like a church, where many people may feel out of place

or uncomfortable. I believe that my experience at the museum, dealing with and overcoming the feeling of not belonging there, has changed the way I view and approach art. Contrary to popular belief, a belief I once held, the truth is that, art museums, and museums in general, are for everyone, and artworks do not only have one meaning, they can mean a variety of things to a variety of different people. Therefore, I did not just walk out of that diverse, Miami art museum without gaining anything; as I walked out of there, passing by those “art experts” that I (once) thought were so above me, I walked out of there, with a totally new understanding for and appreciation of art, one that I know I can trust.



Small white label with illegible text, likely a museum identification tag.