



# THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

SCOTT DOUGLASS

# **The Museum Experience**

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Australia Canada Mexico Singapore Spain United States

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## **Chapter One**

### **Visiting a Museum**

As with so many opportunities of this nature, visiting a museum can be an exciting and rewarding experience—or it can prove disappointing and frustrating. Those who have enjoyed visiting a wide variety of museums eagerly anticipate the prospect of taking in yet another. But those who have not visited a museum might need a bit of persuasion to make that initial visit. This guide is intended to assist all who are considering a visit to a museum, regardless of your experiences.

Many readers will turn to this guide for specific assistance in writing a review of an exhibition or of a particular work of art. Because the guide offers a wide variety of insights intended to enrich anyone's visit to a museum, even those who have neither of these purposes in mind will likely benefit from reading these chapters.

#### **Planning Your Visit**

Your visit to the museum begins before you actually enter the building that houses the exhibits. In fact, it might begin a week or so in advance. A great way to prepare for your visit is to log on to the museum's website. A quick search with your favorite web browser will locate the URL for the museum's website. The information that you'll gather at the website will depend on the quality of the site's features and the time that you devote to investigating them.

The site's features will probably include the basic information that would help anyone planning a visit, particularly the museum's location and its hours of operation.

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Many sites also include a calendar of events, usually on a monthly basis. For instance, like many museums, the Hunter Museum of American Art <[www.huntermuseum.org/](http://www.huntermuseum.org/)> in Chattanooga, Tennessee, offers “Freebie Friday” on the first Friday of each month, when no admission fee is charged. Such information might be especially helpful as you schedule your visit.

Other categories of information available on the website might include an overview of current exhibits as well as a virtual tour of the museum’s collection. By becoming aware of exhibits currently featured at the museum you intend to visit, you’ll know if you should schedule your visit so you can take advantage of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view the Renoir exhibit that will be in town for a limited time. Similarly, by investing an hour or so to take the virtual tour, you’ll gain valuable insights to help you prepare for your “real-time” visit. You could identify specific portions that you find especially interesting and then plan to devote sufficient time to viewing them. In addition, if your visit to the museum will culminate in your writing a review, information on the website might help you identify the piece or pieces on which you’d like to focus your attention.

Even if you capitalize on the information provided by the museum’s website, call the museum’s office a day or two in advance of your visit. As you’ve probably realized from other situations, material posted to the website might be out of date when you view it. A well-timed phone call allows you to confirm the museum’s hours of operation and ticket prices, plus you can inquire about extended hours or discount admission for which you might qualify.

A few hours of preparation, then, can be extremely beneficial for your museum visit. Many visitors find it especially helpful to make a “Top 10” list of the works of art that they want to be certain to view. When you arrive, ask the staff member at the information desk for specific locations. The museum’s staff wants to make your visit an enjoyable and memorable experience. Keep this in mind throughout your visit as well.

**Museum Etiquette**

A museum's two chief responsibilities compel it to exist in a perpetual dilemma. The museum's collection must be protected, of course, but visitors must be permitted to view and enjoy it. If the collection is merely locked in a vault, it will be preserved, but it won't be enjoyed. Then we must wonder for what purpose is the collection being preserved?

Even before you enter the exhibit areas, you'll encounter several of the museum's security measures. Most museums require that backpacks, briefcases, packages, and any other handheld objects be subject to inspection. If you refuse to submit to an inspection, the security officer will probably deny you entry. Many of these items—particularly a backpack and even an umbrella—are not allowed inside, so you'll be wise to leave them at home or in your car. Some museums offer limited locker rentals, but don't count on it.

You'll often encounter other security restrictions as well. While many museums offer areas for dining—from light snacks to extensive meals—food and beverage will not be permitted into the exhibition areas. Cameras of any kind are usually prohibited; flash photography is rarely permitted. If you're accompanied by a younger sibling or friend, be prepared to confirm that you are an adult, willing to be responsible for your companion's behavior. If someone in your group is quite young, be prepared to find that strollers are not permitted in the museum or, more likely, in some areas. (A telephone call in advance will help you avoid an awkward situation as you enter the facilities.) And if your group is fairly large, each member might be asked to wear a visitor badge.

Because a museum is a home for rare and priceless works of art, guidelines must be established so that the museum can fulfill its two chief responsibilities—protecting its works of art and permitting visitors to view them. It seems fair, then, that you as a visitor have two chief responsibilities: Be cautious as you view the exhibits and be considerate of other visitors (those visiting on the day of your visit and those who will do so in the years to come).



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Virtually every museum depends on its visitors' adherence to a general set of guidelines, whether or not the guidelines are posted on signs or prescribed in a brochure. Although some visitors might consider them a nuisance, the guidelines are intended to protect the collection, not to inconvenience the visitor. If the choice has to be made, though, the museum will prefer the safety of its artifacts to the comfort of its visitors. Here are some general guidelines that museums commonly assume their visitors to observe.

- **Avoid touching the works of art.**

Stay at least an arm's length away from the displays. Even pointing at objects might raise unnecessary concerns among the museum's security personnel. You might benefit from folding your arms or putting your hands in your pockets.

- **Avoid walking behind the ropes.**

The ropes are placed to establish an area of safety for the work of art. Your intrusion into that space might set off an alarm and you might share an uncomfortable moment with the museum's security personnel.

- **Avoid using a display case as support for writing or sketching.**

Too much pressure with your pencil might scratch the glass. Even more pressure might break the glass. Instead, use one of the museum's brochures. Better yet, come equipped with a notebook or a clipboard.

- **Avoid leaning on a display to steady your camera.**

As you concentrate on framing the shot and seek to steady your body for a perfect photograph, you might not realize that your shoulder has found support from a thousand-pound ancient Egyptian stone artifact. Again, avoid that uncomfortable moment with the security personnel.

Accompanying these policies to protect the works of art are guidelines designed to allow each visitor to have an enjoyable and enriching museum visit. Most of the guidelines are based on good manners. When you recall that many museum visitors read display labels, listen to an audiotape, and share ideas about the works of art, you'll understand how many of these guidelines evolved to help everyone concentrate and enjoy.

- **Speak in quiet tones.**

Think of the museum's atmosphere as similar to that of a library. Feel free to comment about the art and share your opinions with companions. Be thoughtful of other visitors, though. Avoid speaking at a volume that inadvertently shares your opinions with those who are not in your party and who probably have no interest.

- **Walk calmly and respectfully.**

Maintaining a moderate—even a slow—pace allows you time to examine the works of art. You also avoid distracting others who have come to view stationary art rather than inconsiderate visitors zipping by. Again, consider the library's atmosphere.

- **Wait for others to finish at an exhibit.**

Many visitors pause near a work of art to reflect on its meaning and the artist's intentions. Be watchful for such a situation and respect their time and space. After they've moved on, you may then approach the display.

### **Capitalizing on Your Visit**

During your visit, you may move freely throughout the galleries. You might be surprised, though, by how tiring a museum visit can be. Most people find that a visit of a few hours is sufficient. Depending on the museum's size, your advance

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preparation for the visit will help you see more and tire less. An especially useful way to prepare in advance is to wear comfortable shoes. Another method of delaying the fatigue that almost certainly intrudes at some point during the visit is to take breaks throughout your visit. Many museums have your tired feet in mind when they place comfortable seating areas in the galleries. If you're fortunate, you might find a seat near a work of art that you consider especially appealing. With that extra amount of time to enjoy the work, your rest will be all the more refreshing. Another seat might seem far from the artwork until you realize that the building's architecture is itself a work of art worth your attention. And if these options aren't successful in reviving you, visit the museum's cafeteria for a snack.

When the museum hosts a special exhibition, however, the traffic pattern is controlled in anticipation of the large crowds that will attend. In fact, the museum will restrict the number of visitors at specific times, often selling a limited number of tickets. Being aware of these circumstances will help you avoid missing a wonderful opportunity.

One approach to visiting a museum is to walk through all of the galleries, pausing only at those works of art that appeal to you. If you realize that a single visit won't permit you to walk through all of the galleries, you can choose an alternative approach that involves concentrating on a few of the galleries that you find most appealing. Your preparation for the visit—through the website and the phone call—will pay dividends here.

Whatever approach you choose, one of the best ways to make your visit more enjoyable is by taking advantage of the aids that the museum offers.

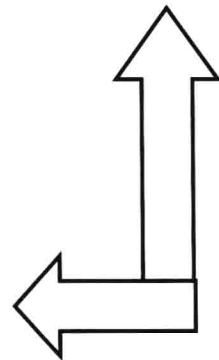
**Figure 1: Typical Display in a Museum**

Featuring the work of art and the display card (which has been enlarged)



Brian Douglass  
United States  
1985 –  
*The First Burst of Spring*  
1994  
acrylic on canvas  
8 inches X 10 inches  
acquired through anonymous gift

Brian Douglass  
United States  
1985 –  
*The First Burst of Spring*  
1994  
acrylic on canvas  
8 inches X 10 inches  
acquired through anonymous gift



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### **Written Materials**

To help you enjoy your visit, many museums offer a variety of written materials. Among the most useful is a museum floor plan, which serves as a map to help you locate exhibits. An entire floor, for example, might be devoted to a historical period (Pre-Columbian), a geographical region (New England), or a style of art (Impressionism). As you tour the museum, look near each work of art for a small plaque that provides essential information related to the work.

Depending on the occasion, some museums provide other printed materials as well. An exhibit of a single artist's work, for example, might prompt the museum to provide a single-page pamphlet that describes the artist's technique and offers biographical information about the artist. An exhibit of the work of multiple artists might call for a more complex brochure, with perhaps a page devoted to each artist, her biography and technique. And then for an exhibition of the work of a celebrated artist (Mary Cassatt, for example), the museum will offer an elaborate catalogue for purchase. These are truly fine souvenirs, providing biographical information, informative commentary, and reproductions of the exhibit's works.

### **Audiotapes**

An exhibition of a celebrated artist's work might also be accompanied by an audiotape that provides informative commentary about the works and the artist's techniques. For a nominal fee, you may rent the tapes along with a player and headphones, and then return all of these items to a convenient location at the conclusion of your visit.

### **Docents**

Many museum staffs include docents, who serve as tour guides and are outstanding resources eager and able to answer your questions. To become a docent, each person must undergo thorough training to learn about the museum's

collection and its special exhibits. Because of their excellent service—usually in a volunteer capacity—docents are respected and admired by everyone closely associated with the museum. Inquire at the information desk for details on how you might join a docent's tour. And even if you don't join a tour, you might listen in on the docent's comments when you encounter her tour as you visit independently.

### **Enjoy Your Visit**

You'll know that your visit has been a success if you leave the museum with the satisfaction that you've seen several memorable works of art. You'll be even more fortunate if you consider some of these works so exceptional that they remain in your mind for weeks to come. With an appropriate measure of preparation, your museum visit can be a stimulating and enriching experience. Perhaps the most useful bit of advice is to ask questions. Learn, enjoy, and return with a friend.

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### Activities

The following activities are intended to help you become familiar with what you'll likely encounter on display when you visit a museum.

#### Activity 1.1: A Virtual Visit to a Museum

Take a virtual tour of the Montreal Museum of Art's collections by visiting its website <[www.mbam.qc.ca/lundi/a-cyber-lundi.html](http://www.mbam.qc.ca/lundi/a-cyber-lundi.html)>. Select one of the galleries, where you'll find several works of art available for a closer look. When you select one of the paintings within the gallery, you'll find accompanying information:

Artist's name  
nationality  
year of birth and year of death  
Artwork's title  
year of completion  
technique (e.g., oil on canvas)  
dimensions  
Museum's method of acquisition (often a bequest)

#### Activity 1.2: A Virtual Visit to a Museum

In some instances, museums provide further insights about works of art. The Montreal Museum of Art's virtual display for Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *Apelles Painting the Portrait of Campaspe*, for example, supplements the customary information with an explanation of the artist's intentions. Visit the web page for Tiepolo's piece <[www.mbam.qc.ca/lundi/a-lundi8103.html](http://www.mbam.qc.ca/lundi/a-lundi8103.html)> to learn more about the artist, his subject, and the connection to Alexander the Great.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Selecting a Piece to Review**

During your museum visit, allow enough time to look at each work, some more closely than others. For those of particular interest to you, gain further insights by reading the accompanying text on the display card or in the brochure. Be certain to note the location so you can return later for further scrutiny. After you've completed this initial "walk through" of the museum, return to several of the works that made significant impressions on you.

Perhaps you have a special fondness for a particular model of automobile. Have you paused to consider why it interests you? Is its color a key factor? Or is it the body style in general—regardless of color—that appeals to you? In a similar way, studying a particular piece of art in more depth can help you become more aware of your response to the piece. In fact, a closer examination of the work can be an extremely rewarding experience. It can lead to a more solid understanding of a work or an artist, sharpen your analytical eye, and increase your appreciation for art in general.

Do you occasionally see one of your favorite automobiles parked at Wal-Mart and catch yourself imagining that you're its owner? Now and in the future, you might also encounter an especially intriguing piece of art that compels you to pause, reflect, and even purchase it so you can place it in your home and admire it for many years to come.

Chapter Three provides information that will help you increase your enjoyment in a work—even if you're not writing a review. With an awareness of the



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elements and principles discussed in Chapter Three, you'll have more thorough appreciation of what an artist is trying to convey.

### **Recalling the Assignment**

Your Art Appreciation or Art History instructor may ask you to write a review of a museum exhibit or of a single work of art that you find especially interesting during your museum visit. If such is the case, be sure to recall the assignment specifics on your trip.

As you prepare to write the review, of course, you'll need to select a piece (or pieces) that lend themselves to your complying with the assignment's specific details. To accomplish this, you'll need to have a written copy of the assignment with you as you move through the museum. Don't trust to your memory. A minor oversight undetected until you've left the museum might necessitate a return visit. While that might not seem a severe penalty, the time devoted to correcting the oversight might delay your completing the assignment and risk late submission. Go to the museum fully prepared.

The information you'll need also depends on the assignment's specific requirements. Almost certainly, though, you'll need the title, the artist, the date of completion, the work's dimensions, and the medium. In addition, you should record any other information that you find on the display card and have the slightest suspicion that it might prove helpful as you write the review.