

Artslant

How To Touch In Museums

February 1, 2011

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I want you to touch in museums.

Ok now, don't piss off the museum guards. Be polite. Say "Hello" and "Thank You" to these diligent watchers, these hourly protectors of art, but still don't let them see you touching.

Do not get caught.

When touching paintings and sculptures in museums, it should be more of a quick grazing, a light touch, a dance of your fingers. Move past, touching. Hand held low, don't stop to touch. You are walking—don't rush, keep a regular pace—look seriously, look thoughtfully—in a blink, you graze. Perhaps not even with the tips of your fingers, which hold the archivist nightmare of damaging oils, but even the back of your fingers, as if touching the face of someone you desire for the first time, your knuckles smoothing across their face.

Don't laugh.

After touching, your hand should go right back into your pocket, right away, and you should keep on moving.

You can't exist only in your own mind or devour only with your eyes; you need some material grounding. Especially in the pristine, pin-pricks-are-touched-up, high-end world of the modern museum, you need to remind yourself of the sound of the kiln heating up, snort like you are snorting a little charcoal dust, remember the brayer, the cadmium-and-cobalt-crusty first-year studio floor. The light quick touch is your material, physical reminder of where art comes from.

You are just having a bit of the frosting, just a hint of a taste of the cake. You need it. Only touch one or two objects per museum visit.

Don't be greedy.

Don't go to any museum alone. Go with a lover. The fact that there are places in this world—no matter how dusty, how fraught by problematic exclusionary politics, opaque agendas, whitewashings, and re-inventions—the fact that there are places reserved for archives, for evidence of experiments, for still-mushing piles and every carved and polished spoon, every indiscrete material obsession... Love this!

There is too much velvety drapery depicted at the Louvre, so too much that you will just feel bursting with wanting to touch. I'm not kidding, be a real lush for drapery.

You will realize that three landscapes are pretty much exactly the same but that upon close inspection, the trees in these three paintings are very different. This will be an exciting revelation, a rush actually. Soon, you will start to be able to distinguish between the nostrils in the sculpture of diverse ancient cultures and you will feel proud, proud in your blood.

You will stand at the center of a gallery, any gallery in the museum, spin around 360 degrees, and you will undoubtedly, deliciously, grandiosely, imagine making every object in that gallery. And, at that moment, you could. You will feel stirred up. You will, of course, be excited. You will

love all of the artists and all of the objects.

Don't be sleazy; don't fumble with the greedy hands of a feverish teenager; reach out for your lover. Sneak into the bathroom with your lover and be obscenely enthusiastic.

In the museum, touch everywhere. Enter the museum through the service entrance, take the nearest elevator, and come right up into the museum. Go to museums all the time, and always take this way in. If you look like you know where you're going, and if you maintain a slightly sour look (the face of exhausted bureaucrats and crate-pushers everywhere), security will rarely stop you. A museum is like an iceberg, slow to move or change, and most of its heft is untouchable to the great majority of us—someone else's treasures or embarrassments locked underneath. Get underneath if you can.

Imagine touching what the museum doesn't show you, what is left in boxes in the dark, the broken chairs, the awkward gift that came with the desired prize, the artist that the museum acquisition committee thought was going to be forever really huge, now too fragile, all the dinged edges, hard-to-explain... Touch all of that and more.

Some of the objects in some museums are worth money. Some are worth money now, but were certainly not before. Some were stolen. Most were at some point in a corner, or stacked in a train car, demeaned, or used as a weapon, buried in dirt.

In his essay, "Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child," 1953, Matisse recounts: "I have often asked visitors who came to see me at Vence, 'Have you seen the acanthus thistles by the side of the road?' No one had seen them; they would all have recognized the leaf of an acanthus on a Corinthian capital, but the memory of the capital prevented them from seeing the thistle in nature. The first step towards creation is to see everything as it really is, and that demands a constant effort."

The same that is true of seeing Matisse's thistles in Vence holds true for touching in museums. It is up to you to get inside the work on the walls, in the cases, or better yet to get inside the ideology in the air, and lay there in that ideology—lay there!—stay very still and listen, or rustle around as necessary, insert, re-do, re-arrange the imperfect present for yourself.