



Museum Legs

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AUTHOR Q & A

How did you decide to write a book about art museums?

In my second year at business school—in 2001—I was doing an independent study on art museums and seeing luminary museum directors speak about visionary plans. Yet every time I took my friends to museums, we all got tired, physically and metaphysically. At the time, I was practically evangelical about museums, believing they were public institutions in the larger visual culture. But each time my friends hobbled out of the gallery, I had usually already adjourned to the coffee shop. Museums appeared outwardly successful, with all the expansion of their architectural footprint and record numbers of visitors. But then there were my slumped friends.

How did you become interested in museums to begin with?

In college, I had studied political science and studio art. I went to work in museums after graduating, because I thought museums were public or political institutions in relation to visual and creative life, by a broad definition of art. I started in marketing at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, then in education at the Guggenheim Museum, and then in business strategy at the Tate in London. I also worked for the artist Jenny Holzer.

So you started writing in 2001 and the book is coming out now. What happened in the interim?

In 2001, I was part of a wave of MBA graduates whose consulting or banking jobs were deferred or rescinded due to the economy. I worked as a researcher at Harvard and Yale during that time, and was lucky to have a Harvard library card and some spare time. At the end of that year, I had an opportunity to get an MFA in painting at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, and I went for it. When I returned, I got a job in a large investment firm with a history of hiring artists or other creative people. I thought I would be able to write outside of work but, like many people, I



struggled to find the time or mental energy for creative projects with a demanding work schedule. So the book that had taken its initial shape in business school and in the sub-sub basement of the Harvard library where they kept the dusty museum tomes, then incubated in a fine art program and in a massive quantitative hedge fund, before I left to finish it.

It seems unusual to have a background across art and business. How did that happen?

For whatever reason, I have always been one of these crossover people—more a bridge than a plot of land. I've always been broadly curious and like to connect information across fields. After business school, I was fortunate to have really interesting work projects and research appointments in totally other fields. I was an economics research fellow at Yale writing a 100-page white paper on the FDA drug approval process in the 1990s. I worked with a team of professors who were writing Internet law books at Harvard.

All of this time working outside of the arts helped me in two ways: First, I was given a hands-on experience of trying to balance the many different fields of knowledge museums themselves have to juggle—not just art but management and economics and contracts and psychology, to name a few. Secondly, it gave me perspective and helped me to understand more about the audience I was trying to reach. I wanted to write for curious generalists in any field, not only for designers or managers of arts policy.

What's one of the most surprising things you've learned from this one-foot-in-each-field approach?

When I completed art school in London and moved to New York, I worked in finance and was surprised to find it refreshing. It was so obviously about money that it was really about character, whereas in the arts sometimes people pretended it was about people but it was really about money.

I also met a number of tremendously creative people, but who had applied themselves in industry, not in the arts per se. Some of the work was even highly visually creative, whether spotting proverbial kinks in yield curves or eagle-eye copyediting or seeing the visual presentation of financial analysis and frameworks.

I've also enjoyed working across the fields. In art school, I gave lunchtime talks in economics and finance that became a booklet *Business School for Artists*. I would tape the *FT* to my paintings triple-ply to use as a blackboard—there was no extra wall space—and then open the *Companies and Markets* section with the preface, "You never have to look in here again but you should know what it is..." People would make startlingly insightful business strategy suggestions, and then later replicate the exact shade of *FT* salmon pink in watercolor because they thought it was beautiful.

Conversely, I have taught painting to a whole office of management consultants, including a "three-minute history of art" and a "five-minute tutorial in oil painting." There is that moment of acknowledgment that the guy in the full-body painter's suit is the partner in charge.

Last January I put the two together and taught "Entrepreneurship as an Art Form"—cross-listed in art and economics—as a Williams College Winter Study course.

If you could change one thing about how people experience museums, what would it be?

I believe strongly in the presence of innate creativity in everyone. Often when people go to a museum, that creativity isn't accessed. People are asked to judge and evaluate and appreciate art, to identify with a critic or historian. I would like for people to feel like they are themselves artists and to identify with the people whose work is in museums as fellow creative souls. For everyone to be an artist is another way of saying that everyone is a citizen of the art world, that is, someone with a vote and an ability to participate, someone who can come to trust his or her own judgment.

How do you look at museums as political institutions?

We live in one of the most visually overwhelming cultures of all time, and museums are one of the few institutions with the capacity to anchor us, to be trusted judges whose taste is insulated from the whims of the market. At least in theory, museums don't sell what they show, which differentiates them from television, advertising, design, fashion, and even photographs in the newspaper. This is exactly what museums have going for them, the quiet and still base of their towering potential.

Museums are analogous to an insulated judiciary in the arts. In the same way that Supreme Court justices are appointed for life and lawyers recuse themselves for conflicts of interest, museums are necessarily a little separate from their counterparts in the leisure industry. Museums do often try to compete and benchmark against other recreational activities like film. But doing this can make museums a little bit like a kid on a soccer field who is going to where the ball is because the excitement is there, instead of staying open for the pass.

How is *Museum Legs* different from other books on museums?

I specifically did not want to write a purely academic book. I was writing about why my friends got bored and tired in museums. As I explain in the book, boredom can be a marker of what is essentially political disenfranchisement. I wasn't therefore going to write a book about disenfranchisement that was itself a disenfranchising read. I wanted *Museum Legs* to be academically researched and useful to a museum specialist, but I wanted it to be broadly readable, and engaging too. I hoped that the book would be an art project in which form would follow function. I wanted the book to try to do what museums do: to believe that if one is clear and sincere, it is not necessary to dumb anything down, and to recognize that enjoyment or pleasure is central to, not the opposite of, learning and the acquisition of knowledge in the arts.

What would you say to someone who is skeptical of modern art?

I would say that you have great company in Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote of the first modern art exhibition in America that "the lunatic fringe was fully in evidence," and went on to

compare Marcel Duchamp's now iconic *Nude Descending a Staircase (no. 2)* unfavorably to a Navajo rug in his own bathroom.

I would also say there are great artists working today who would say the same thing. The whole idea of *Museum Legs* is to invite more people to have an opinion and to participate in the conversation around art. I would love for artists to expand their frame of reference to create more art about life, not just art about art. And I would like more people to feel able to make art themselves. Of course, many people who work in museums do consider these questions all the time, often with some sincere anxiety about trying to please or plan for their audiences.

How do you articulate a role for museums relative to that?

First, I would like for more people to have access to actually making art, so that visiting a museum is more like watching a sport having played it once, or seeing a concert having played the violin or the guitar or the recorder. If museums want to expand architecturally, they could include art-making facilities. Secondly, US museums could learn from their British counterparts and try to have free admissions. People get sensory overload from taking in a quantity of artworks trying to get their money's worth. Third, we should champion the museum drop-in. You stop by for half an hour, look at a few things, and leave. A museum is like a perfume counter: There's only so much you can sample before you lose all sense of smell. Seeing a huge number of artworks is often a function of economics, not art.

What do you hope for people reading the book?

First, I hope that it is enjoyable, and that people learn something along the way, on their own terms. Secondly, I hope for people to have access to creativity in their own lives. If that takes them to museums, great. If it doesn't, I hope the book helps them to take a pause from working life and feel a present-minded sense of imagination. Museums exist to change the way we think and notice when we are walking down the street not just in front of art. Creativity is, hearteningly, in the eye of the beholder. []



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