

Museum Legs

Amy Whitaker



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MUSEUM LEGS Amy Whitaker
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[UNCORRECTED ADVANCE SAMPLE]

Pleasure is not something essentially trivial; nor is knowledge something essentially important. The more vivid and overwhelming pleasure becomes the more absolutely serious a thing it is; while there is nothing more frivolous than the didactic trifle known as the pedant.

Benjamin Ives Gilman

Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method, 1918

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*In memory of my father John Whitaker, and my grandfather
Bus Emanuel, role models in jargon-free hard work, glimmer-
in-the-eye humor, and instinctive kindness.*

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First Friday

To furnish the means of acquiring knowledge is, therefore, the greatest benefit that can be conferred upon mankind. It prolongs life itself, and enlarges the sphere of existence.

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

ON THE OPENING OF THE SMITHSONIAN

“*Duuude*,” INTONED CHRIS, A BRILLIANT economist who covers for seriousness with a surfer speech pattern. “I didn’t just pay \$4.50 for this.” He was staring down at an 80-20 ratio of plate to food—two meatballs doused in sauce, a corral of spicy olives, and two miniature slices of pizza. “I thought it was a *free* buffet.” We were standing in the rotunda during First Friday at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

First Friday is an event where each month the museum opens up a different gallery after hours, serving drinks and food against a musical backdrop. We paid \$15, though it was free to students, and, apparently, the museum routinely hits its capacity of a few thousand. I was new to Boston at the time and, having been to Friday or Saturday night events in New

York—drinks on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with an amazing 360-degree view of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline, or eclectic jazz and a young, hip set at the Museum of Modern Art. I was curious to see what the Boston equivalent would have to offer.

I don't know quite what I was expecting, but the whole setting felt like one of those what's-wrong-with-this-picture scenes in which a briefcase is stuck to the ceiling and people wearing shorts in the snow. For starters, it *looked* like a frat party with jammed wall-to-wall people holding drinks, but the people were too old. It was what Karen, fellow veteran of the New York museum scene, aptly if uncharitably described as “forty-year-old divorcées in bad shoes.” The setting was a gorgeous, vaulted-roof gallery, but it was hung almost exclusively with Mannerist depictions of the dying Christ or portraits of royal children playing with royal dwarfs. I wondered if it was even possible to tune out the party long enough to look at the art—most of it hung considerably above eye level. By the time my eyes fixed on a particularly elongated figure of Christ, my peripheral vision started to take in the adjacent painting of an overdressed toddler—heir to the Spanish throne—scurrying around after a court dwarf her own size. Meanwhile, the soothing sounds of Billy Ocean wafted over from the deejay table.

Karen and I had just finished wagering whether “La Bamba” would be the next song when we decided to venture out to the atrium where the food, drink, and more convenient people-watching were. We selected the featured cocktail of the evening, pear martinis. The bartender charmingly cracked open individual six-ounce cans of Goya pear juice while speaking to Karen in French for no particular reason.

We eased through the crowd to the atrium railing and I asked Karen what she thought. “Well, for starters, no one is looking at the art. There is good lighting and noise level though.” Karen was in architecture school and always noticed the lighting.

“So,” Karen continued, looking around, “I’d say it’s white, educated professional types, but *casual* professionals with unexpected shades of quirkiness,” leaning in to whisper, “hence that sweater vest next to you.”

“And certainly healthy,” she said motioning to the restricted portion of food on her plate.

I asked the same questions of Chris, who was by now deeply suspicious that I had scribed his “dude” comment.

“Yeah, definitely seems really white. Did you ever see that movie *Spy Game*—where you go into a room and notice everyone—and see that the middle-aged guy in the blazer needs to be watched? It reminds me of that.”

Neither Karen nor I had seen the movie.

We returned to the main room and ran into a woman Chris knew. They talked animatedly for a few minutes and exchanged business cards. Then Chris returned to us and said, “She stood me up for Valentine’s in New York three years ago.” Hmmm, heartening singles scene.

Through the crowd I could see Pete, an acquaintance who was coming to join us with two female friends in tow. Pete had the

sort of good looks and Harvard hair that meant he was also shrugging off an extremely tan woman in subtle leopard print trousers on his way over. He had his own, also uncharitable take on the events, “You can complain all you want that people aren’t looking at the art, but if they were all better looking you wouldn’t be complaining.”

We took in some other sites in the museum—Karen’s favorite John Singer Sargent painting and a whole exhibition of glamour photos that, perhaps owing to her Frenchness, Karen managed to get us into for free. Then we left, down \$15 for admission, \$6 for pear martinis and \$4.50 for those plates of food.

There had been something perplexing about the evening, apart from the over-aged frat party scene, that I couldn’t put my finger on until much later, when I happened to attend the mid-week Memphis counterpart: First Wednesday.



“Y’aaah-aall, we had our first sorority party at Chuck E. Cheeeese. Biiiiig mistake. Our boyfriends got into a fight with some guy dressed up as the mouse and we got kicked out.”

I was sitting with Martha, my oldest childhood friend, and her mother at a table in the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. We had planned to visit First Wednesday for no more than thirty minutes, but were already settled into the museum’s main foyer where the party was taking place. It was a largish rotunda with a spring break feel likely brought on by an acoustic band on one side and neon light emanating from a “video obelisk” in the middle. Small bistro tables dotted the room with clusters of

people chatting in the intervening spaces. There was a high incidence of women in Capri pants, and the cautionary tale about taking the sisterhood to Chuck E. Cheese was coming from a Southern archetype—perfectly groomed and holding a bottle of Bud Light—sitting at an adjoining table.

On this particular First Wednesday, the museum was working in conjunction with the Memphis Zoo on an animal theme, and so the featured drink was a Blue Monkey martini, sponsored by a local bar of the same name. In a pendulum swing from the individuality of the six-ounce Goya pear juice cans in Boston, the Blue Monkey martinis were being batch-processed in enormous white plastic jugs—think Tupperware meets garbage bin—and scooped out with disaffected-school-cafeteria-worker care. A blue plastic monkey with a curved tale hooked itself onto the edge of my glass, more than meeting my expectations for thematic tie-in.

The museum, however, had opted to take the animal concept further. We were notified on our way in—incidentally, by a museum employee in a subtle leopard print blouse—that they would be auctioning off original works of art made by the primates at the zoo. Our attention was drawn, Vanna White-style, to samples that could only be described as Clifford Still-meets-De Kooning, which is to say, actually not too bad.

As in Boston, it was not immediately obvious that one was supposed to pay for the food: four-for-five-dollars seared tuna morsels, though “the crackers are complimentary.” The woman who was taking money had a secret-service-agent relationship to the table. A particularly elegant woman in her seventies tried to serve herself some tuna, only to have the attendant ap-

pear out of nowhere, correct her, and offer free crackers.

Seeing that the Chuck E. Cheese lady was wearing a staff badge, I decided to strike up a conversation. What did she think of the primate art?

Bud Light still delicately in manicured grip, she started in, “Well, needless to say, it’s very abstract. I’d like to see one create it.” I agreed that the artistic process might be even more interesting than the finished artwork. I just didn’t expect to have this point driven home in the primate context. (Upon hearing the story later, a family friend added, “Well, I’d much rather have chimp art because they’re a whole lot smarter.”)

I decided my radar for Southern culture was a little off on account of living far away, so I asked Martha and her mother if they thought this was a pick-up scene. “Yes. *Major*,” Martha replied instantly. Her mother nodded matter-of-factly, perfectly coiffed Southern hair going up and down with a genteel knowingness. Divorcées in Memphis wear much brighter colors.



Despite having been geographically transplanted a few times over, my Southern etiquette is up-to-date on the following fact: In the South, serving cold beer out of a small dumpster filled with ice can be the height of hospitality and sophistication, entirely dependent on the warmth and charm of the host or hostess, and perhaps also the coldness of the beer. No one would care if there was a charge for seared tuna (and crackers) if it was done in a positive way, perhaps flying under the flag

of the Junior League for instance. The Memphis party had felt more hospitable than the Boston one but I was still figuring out why.

I thought about what the museums were trying to accomplish with these events and wondered if they were trying to educate or entertain us, or both. Throughout their history, museums have been seen as a scholarly elite, endowed with good taste, and therefore charged with elevating the masses accordingly. There was a belief that art could change “the workingman into a self-regulating moral agent capable of managing and subduing his passions in developing a commitment to a way of life based on prudential principles of self-restraint.” As Tony Bennett writes in *The Birth of the Museum*, governmental initiatives in the nineteenth century “transformed museums from semi-private institutions restricted largely to the ruling and professional classes into major organs of the state dedicated to the instruction and edification of the general public.”

In turn-of-the-century industrial revolution England, a hey-day for the construction of museums, people even thought museums would curb public drunkenness. When a new gallery opened in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a contemporary newspaper reported:

The anxious wife will no longer have to visit the different taprooms to drag her poor besotted husband home. She will seek for him at the nearest museum, where she will have to exercise all persuasion of her affection to tear him away from the rapt contemplation of a Raphael.

Increasingly, most visitors to museums are not “masses” of

newly industrialized factory workers narrowly avoiding that extra pint (thanks, Raphael), but school groups, tourists, art aficionados, yuppies (in sweater vests), and the dating hopeful.

Museums have traditionally known best how to handle two specific subsets of their visitors: patrons and outreach recipients. To the first, museums extend hospitality; to the second, charity. For donors, museums know how to break out the glassware, serve free food, and create comfortably glitzy settings. For schoolchildren, museums know how to teach and extend themselves, sometimes even going away from the site of the museum and into the classroom to further their educational goals. In one case, museums are at the highest reaches of *supporting* their programs, and in the other, at the furthest frontier of *realizing* them. Things get a bit murkier in the middle ground.

Understanding that murkiness involves looking at the concept of hospitality in relation to marketing, education, and politics. In the case of an event like First Friday, the museum has *invited* people to a party, and that invitation connotes some extension of hospitality, the purpose of which is to make people feel at ease and comfortable enough to be open to an experience. That openness and enjoyment can in turn encourage the sort of education that happens in museums and can also effectively serve the marketing function of making people want to come back.

The overarching concept here is one of generosity, which can be at odds with a more transactional economic perspective on the part of a museum. In Boston, it had felt like the museum had segmented its audience and might have been more hospitable to higher level donors than to the everyday members of the public attending this event. They seemed to *want* to invite in

new audiences but up to a point. The cash-cow overtones made it feel like the museum was transparently ambivalent between pimping out its space for income and inviting people to see art among friends while enjoying a drink. For those economic reasons, a marketing plan seemed to have failed and with it a chance for education and entertainment too.

Marketing as a concept is often seen as being at odds with education, but one could also say that marketing creates entertainment for those not yet committed to invest themselves in formal learning. Marketing provides information up to the point at which someone's initially limited, or even barely formed, curiosity is met. Eventually, education may also involve non-entertaining forms of hard work that might require patience and discipline. But the kind of education that happens in museums is often inseparable from the experience of art and thus is particularly susceptible to visitors feeling at their ease. Thus hospitality dovetails with the most generous characteristics of education—the desire to share or impart knowledge or understanding and even the personal characteristics of some generous teachers. Museums can aspire to avoid the guarded condescension of strivers on the cusp and to embrace the graciousness of luminaries of the sort who would, if given the chance, explain particle physics to a five year old with lucidity and humor.

This kind of enthusiasm, of extending oneself personally or institutionally, can also be prerequisite to an ideal of political participation. Feeling appreciated or acknowledged can have a transforming effect on a person whether at a party, in an educational setting, or in relation to a political system. Museums can potentially be generous scholars, effusive storytellers, and

kindly hosts, instead of social gatekeepers and torchbearers of what Tony Bennett describes as, “the tendency—undeniably still with us—for art museums to function as socially exclusive institutions in which their habitués accumulate marks of distinction by virtue of the social distance that participation in the art museum establishes for those whom it includes from those whom it excludes.”

The fact was, when the working masses had first been invited to museums, they did actually go. Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, cited a study commissioned by the British Parliament in 1856. There was a groundswell of support for moving great works of art out of the center of London, mainly due to pollution damage. The chief argument for keeping them there was for the access and enjoyment of workers. The main industrial manufacturers were polled, and as MacGregor shared:

In 1856 Jackson the Builders had 338 men who had made 583 visits to the National Gallery. Hooper the Coach Makers had 46 employees who had made 66 visits. And Cloughs the Printers had 117 employees who had made 220 visits to the National Gallery. Linen drapers, butchers, and hairdressers were disappointing—only one visit out of 25 employees.... But the question was answered: the poor did use their pictures.

There is no way of knowing what those experiences were actually like, whether revelatory or dent-making in the public drunkenness. But there is hope that everyone is “using” pictures because they feel invited and curious, pulled toward the art and essentially welcomed, as they cross the heavy threshold

of a museum, courageous in the face of all these distinctly high expectations for moral improvement, sobriety, and aesthetic epiphany.

As for First Friday in Boston, it is possible that a marketing strategy had been brilliantly executed for a target audience that did not include me. In later relaying the story to an esteemed museum professional, he told me that one of his acquaintances had in fact met someone at First Friday. Of course, that acquaintance literally was a forty-year-old divorcée, to say nothing of her shoes, and the person she met had apparently not ended up being the “right somebody,” to say nothing of his sweater vest. Still, perhaps that kind of experience makes it more worth the detachable stemware and crowds of people swaying to “La Bamba.” If you are especially lucky, you might go home with some chimp art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Whitaker has an M.B.A. from Yale and an M.F.A. in painting from the Slade School of Fine Art in London. She has worked in art museums including the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Tate, and for a well-known artist and a well-known hedge fund. This is her first book.



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