

Preface



No book can hope to recreate the experience of seeing a work of art at first hand, any more than a book about birds can attempt to recreate the experience of seeing and hearing them on the wing and in the wild. Most books about paintings will bombard you with facts and figures and history, but I know from my own knowledge and experience that the history of the albatross and statistical information about the bird is as nothing compared with seeing that huge, majestic living creature soar into the sky over a Southern Ocean with outstretched wing tips dipping vertically to skim the surface of the waves.

Reading a book tends to be a fulfilling but solitary experience – and none the worse for that. A visit to the theatre, a concert, a sporting event, an art gallery or an art exhibition, is, I think, at its most fulfilling and satisfying when it is experienced personally and simultaneously shared with others. This book is an attempt to share my experiences of great works of art and recapture some of the excitement (and challenges) of seeking them out and looking at them at first hand.

Two essential things will be missing from this book. The painting itself, and your account of what your own eyes and your own experiences tell you (and which you might want to share). A small colour reproduction of a painting in a book gives no idea of the size of the original, is no substitute for the real thing, and in many ways is positively misleading. For this reason, we (that is the author and the publishers) have decided against colour reproductions. In general, because a colour reproduction inevitably changes the tones and hues of the painting itself, it also destroys its essential balance and harmony. Those latter qualities are best preserved in a good quality black-and-white reproduction. When Kenneth Clark published his book *100 Details from Pictures in the National*

Gallery, he included only black-and-white printed images for this very reason. He also observed: 'Just as a great river does not flow from a single source, but is made up of innumerable tributaries great and small, so the total impression of a work of art is built up of a hundred different sensations, analogies, memories, thoughts – some obvious, many recondite, a few analysable, most beyond analysis.'

In order to add to the innumerable tributaries, I asked my good friend Gino Ballantyne, who is a highly gifted draughtsman and painter, and a most acute and sensitive observer, to add his own impressions and thoughts, not as words but as his own images and interpretations. If you wish to connect with a colour reproduction of each individual painting and zoom in on details you will be able to do so in far greater clarity, detail and freedom than is possible on the printed page through the appropriate page on my website **www.robertcumming.net**. It is not a perfect solution, but it is perhaps closer to the experience of being together in front of the actual painting.

Finally, if you would like to share with myself, Gino and others, your own observations, comments and thoughts we have set up an online forum. You can find this by searching for '**Robert Cumming's Slow Looking**' on Facebook, where you will find my page. Again, there is no substitute for mutual and concurrent first-hand observation and experience any more than there is a substitute for the sight of the albatross. However, that is no reason for not attempting to do the best one can with the facilities currently available.

Foreword

How best to experience the world? In my case, directly through one or more of my five senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. I do know that my moments of greatest pleasure are when all five senses are stimulated simultaneously and harmoniously. Looking at a great work of art is a prime example, as are eating and drinking fine food and wine or being present at a grand opera or a first-class sporting event. On a humbler level, and even though I can do neither very well, playing golf, or duets on the piano, both of which require the senses of hearing, touch and

sight to be at their most alert, have given me some of my most fulfilling experiences.



I enjoy watching how my small grandchildren explore their senses. Their experiences seem to be intense and entirely their own and mostly joyous. The way they assimilate these first sensations will be a major influence on the formation of their characters and personalities, and on what

activities they choose to pursue in later life. I am also conscious that complications will arise when words are added to their awareness. It is through words that they will start to learn what other people experience. For example, sooner or later they inevitably will be told by someone in authority that what they see is not what they ought to see. Gradually their fresh eyesight will dim. Instead of believing the evidence of their own eyes, they may regrettably come to believe only the words they read or hear and see only what they have been told to see.

There are two ways of learning about a work of art factually and appreciating its merits aesthetically. One is to go and visit it at first hand and stimulate the senses, the eyes, the mind and the imagination. The other is to read books. Both ways are equally legitimate, but each has

a very different outcome. The problem with written words is that they can only report what the author has seen – most likely by means of a photograph or reproduction rather than the work of art itself – or thinks he or she might have seen or been told to see, or recount what she or he has read somewhere, or expound theories which are the product of the mind, not of looking.

Experience has taught me that everyone sees something different, and that each person looks at a work of art in an entirely individual way. This may seem like a statement of the obvious, but be warned. Most books about art, written by ‘experts’, will contain a statement, openly or implicitly that ‘what we see here is. . .’. It is a remark which, for me, regularly provokes the response ‘Well, you may do, but I do not. . . . Am I being blind or bigoted or is it you. . . ?’

There is a much-quoted Latin phrase ‘*Ars longa, vita brevis*’. It is usually claimed to mean ‘Life is short, but Art lasts a long time’. This claimed meaning is incorrect. What it truly means is ‘Art (or skill) takes a long time to perfect, but life is short’. Creating any work of art requires huge courage and personal commitment from the creator. In making it, he or she lay his or her cards on the table, revealing not only his or her ability (or lack of it), but many of his or her beliefs, foibles, fears, passions, hopes and disappointments. Anyone who engages with a work of art should be willing to reciprocate with equal courage and commitment. Thus, it is on those occasions when the eyes and minds of the creator and the viewer of a visual work of art are in comprehending union that the greatest rewards are to be found. Turning the direct experience of a mute work of art into words is notoriously difficult, and very personal. This book is my attempt to do so, and why I have felt it imperative to lay some of my own cards on the table.

