

Understanding Art: A Lifelong Struggle

I stood in front of the large, colorful canvas and scrunched my face up in all sorts of strange ways, attempting to look thoughtful. Observing pieces in an art museum was quite intimidating for me. I tried squinting at it, widening my eyes, standing at different angles, and even turning my head in each direction. From every perspective, it looked the same. I took a few steps over to the next painting and started over. I got about half way around the room and decided I'd had enough. I took a seat on the bench nearby and got out my notebook and pen, ready to write. There was only one problem: About what?

Extra credit had driven me to the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) on this nice fall afternoon, and there was only one thing standing between me and ten bonus points. In order to receive credit for attending this cultural field trip, I was required to choose three works of art that I 'connected with' and submit a two page essay about them. When I heard about the assignment, it didn't worry me. How hard could it be to find three pieces in an entire museum full of art? But after circling the entire first floor of the museum, it seemed to be a lost cause. I'd always struggled with interpreting art. It just never made much sense to me. Why did Andy Warhol paint Campbell's soup cans? Who could be intrigued by a portrait of a very average woman who looked quite serious? These thoughts plagued my mind as I laboriously began to jot down ideas about a Japanese painting that I thought I might be able to invent enough of a 'connection' with to include in my essay. I wasn't even sure what it was about the painting that had caught my eye. It was actually quite plain: two women are in an art studio viewing another piece of art. In the background, there are Japanese folding screens behind the women, separating sections of the studio. Thinking back on this painting and my essay, the connection I made was really not with

the artwork but with the artist and his culture as explained on the small plaque that hung next to the painting.

In the beginning of his work “Me Talk Pretty One Day,” David Sedaris explains that he has moved to Paris in hopes of picking up the language more quickly. This was my hope, on a smaller scale, for spending time in the art museum, which I had never visited before. Even though I was only there a few hours, I was submerged in the different forms of artwork during that time. With my school assignment requiring me to analyze my connection with a few of these pieces, I was forced to really try to understand the art that surrounded me. But just as Sedaris didn’t move to France and wake up speaking French the next morning, I couldn’t walk into the IMA and immediately conjure up profound observations of antique, washed out paintings. Sedaris also jokes, “That’s the way they do it here—it’s everybody into the language pool, sink or swim” (Sedaris 68). I have to say I can appreciate his analogy here and as I wandered throughout the museum, I couldn’t help but notice how much easier the assignment seemed to be for everyone else. In the same way, Sedaris recalls hearing other students conversing at school and thinking that speaking French seemed quite effortless for them while it had been a great struggle for Sedaris.

Throughout his essay, Sedaris recalls step by step his struggle with learning French. He describes his unusually harsh professor who ridiculed him and his peers as they fumbled through attempted self-introductions in French, though he allows that he too found some of them humorous, such as the Argentine who declared his love for “making sex with the womens of the world” (Sedaris 69). This brings me back to my days in grade school art classes. I stood by and watched as those children who were naturally gifted at all things art received endless praise and special treatment from teachers, while the rest of us were harshly graded and not offered

assistance or advice to aid learning. Of course, this was a bit different than Sedaris's classroom experience as it seemed that his professor was harsh on all of her students. In addition to my lack of understanding of most artwork, I am terrible at creating virtually every form of art I have attempted. In my years of youth and naivety, I felt that in such a subjective class as art, diligent, hard-working students like me ought to receive an 'A' for effort, despite an unfortunate lack of raw talent. I completed all of our given assignments to the best of my ability and honestly tried to improve on what criticisms teachers did occasionally provide. But again, unlike Sedaris, I was never literally yelled at or told "I hate you." by a teacher, as much as it may have been implied. And I have to agree with Sedaris's note that that sort of message is hard not to take personally.

More so, though, than in my classes where teachers were directly criticizing my artwork, I felt ridiculed on that day at the art museum by the artwork. It seemed as though each piece was somehow mocking me as I stared at it, desperate for some sort of insight. In several places, Sedaris recalls his teacher speaking to him and though he translates the words for the reader, he always leaves a few words that I can only assume are French to show that he didn't fully understand what she was saying. As I looked at the different exhibits in the IMA, I couldn't help but feel that I might as well have been attempting to read a text in a language I can't speak. But in the conclusion of Sedaris's essay, it turns out that the tough love of his professor produced surprising results. Sedaris ends up ignoring the fact that his professor is even speaking to him in a manner that is unprecedented in a classroom as he is so excited at the realization that he can suddenly understand her criticisms. He states that, "It's a small step, nothing more, yet its rewards are intoxicating and deceptive" (Sedaris 72). At this point in my experience with art, this is a feeling I never expected to experience in relation to art interpretation.

I next headed up to the second floor of the museum, hopeful but not expectant of finding some miraculous inspiration. After what seemed like an elaborate maze of plain wooden doors, each leading into another room lined with ancient paintings indistinguishable from the last, I found my way back into the main lobby. It was from there that I wandered into the media arts section and was instantly intrigued by the videos, though I still can't say I understood the first few. Each involved the same man drawing a different shape with chalk and then performing some sort of activity in or around the shape. I was amused but didn't see any hope of connecting with these videos for any purpose other than humor. I moved into a room with a much larger screen and a woman who had drawn a chalk square in the middle of a busy New York sidewalk and proceeded to stand inside the square and "guard" it. Each time someone walked towards her, she would run to that edge of the box and put her hands up to make sure the person would walk around. I grabbed a seat on an oversized bean bag chair and spent a good twenty minutes watching. I read the description and thought this was something I at least understood enough to write about. However, I was basically just describing the film. I realized after jotting down notes that I still wasn't able to analyze any deeper meaning in the piece than what had been explained on the caption. Although I figured I would include this piece in my essay, I decided to keep going.

This was the first step on my way to understanding. I was now at the point that Sedaris was with French when he began taking a class in Paris. As he describes it, "I'm not completely in the dark, yet I understood half of what this woman was saying" (Sedaris 69). The film had shed a little bit of light on art and how it could possibly be appreciated, but I still didn't really understand it.

As I walked past several other odd movies to reenter the main lobby, I discovered a museum map for the first time. I figured I may as well grab one and headed for floor three. As I began ascension on the never-ending escalator, I unfolded the map. Immediately one gallery's title caught my eye: "Textiles and Fashion Arts." Could this be correct? A whole gallery dedicated to fashion? I felt a surge of excitement and eagerly hopped off the escalator as my step vanished into the platform.

I've always been very interested in fashion. I work in retail, in a very trendy shoe store, and consider that my excuse to read countless fashion magazines and watch shows like Project Runway; after all, I have to keep up with the current trends. As I imagined the gallery in my mind, I really wasn't sure what to expect. Would it contain swatches of fabrics? Possibly a display of dated different tools and machines used in the past to create clothing?

I quickly spotted the fashion gallery and made a beeline for the doorway. Once I got inside, I could barely believe it. It was better than I could have imagined. All sorts of revolutionary dresses and other outfits from different countries and time periods were displayed in relevant groupings around the room. And this was just the first section! I started on one side of the room and logically worked my way around, carefully reading each caption and already forming ideas of what I could write about each piece. I was actually connecting with them, and feeling a sense of inspiration by many of the outfits, so much so that I was mentally comparing some of the pieces with those seen in current runway shows from the trendiest designers. The elegant draping and effortless flow of a silky Japanese floor length gown; the innovative mixing of prints and colors that is actually making its way back into style. The inspiration that current designers draw from these previous fashions was clear, and it all began to come full circle.

It was all so interesting to me, in fact, that I couldn't decide which pieces to write about. I took elaborate notes on about half of them and figured I'd decide which to use later. When I finally brought myself to leave the gallery, I headed back down to meet with my class on the first floor. I was early, but I wasn't interested in looking around anymore. I sat down on a bench and sighed with relief. I still couldn't believe I'd found a real connection.

Although I've always had an appreciation for good fashion, I would never have thought of fashion as an art form. After seeing the display in the IMA, it seems quite obvious to me why fashion is considered a big category in the art world. Fashion textiles contain personal expression and beauty and all the things that qualify any other art form as art. It is displayed in fashion shows as paintings or sculptures may be displayed in other showcases. And, of course, it gets its own gallery in a respected art museum. Great fashion designers are skilled in their craft and very well respected in ours and many other cultures across the world. The connections I found between previous and current fashions also shed a little bit of light on why so many people can appreciate more traditional forms of art such as paintings and sculptures. Although I know there are a lot of reasons people create art and even more reasons that people find to appreciate it, a lot of those old paintings that I found bland and boring serve as a depiction of our past. It's history in the form of a painting instead of text. Although I still didn't truly appreciate that particular form of art, it helped me understand how other people do.

When I discovered this side of art that I was able to connect with, I felt that great sense of accomplishment that Sedaris so eloquently describes in his essay. For the first time I felt that all of my time spent struggling to interpret artworks for any number of reasons was somehow justified. As if it had all just been building up to this moment. Yes, it was still only a small step. I had only really connected with one art form. But in my mind, it was a complete success. I

understood art. That was all that mattered. And I was well equipped to crank out my paper as soon as I got home.

In the situation Sedaris writes about in his class, he understands a full criticism from his teacher. He doesn't suddenly begin creating scholarly essays in French. He isn't even claiming to be fluent at the end of the essay after less than a year of picking back up on his studies. Similarly, I am not claiming understanding of every aspect of art. I don't hold any form of deeper understanding of the paintings I had been baffled by in other areas of the museum. And all the years of tough love from my art teachers did not ever come through for my lack of talent in creating any type of art. But what Sedaris is describing is the craving to understand instilled in him by his teacher's ridiculing, followed by the rewarding feeling of applying himself and showing definable improvement in his knowledge of the language.

Although we both ended up with improved understanding of a subject, Sedaris and I did take very different journeys in reaching our individual understandings. He wanted so badly to prove his professor wrong that he began spending several hours a day studying. And in the end his understanding came in the classroom as a product of that hard work. I had never spent quite so much time on art assignments, though in my defense most of them were completed during class time. And my connection with art came much later on, after I'd finished taking any classes on the subject, only after a real experience with art. But nonetheless, after my discovery of the fashion side of art, I feel extremely accomplished and hold a new appreciation for art in general and those who indulge in it.

Works Cited

Sedaris, David. "Me Talk Pretty One Day." *Language and Writing*. Ed. Steve Fox. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 68-72. Print.