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Museum Hours

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MUSEUM HOURS

Are we losing our ability to linger, to reflect, to focus, to absorb—and in turn, the rewards of those? Our writer spends five days in a museum looking at masterworks in order to truly see what lies beyond them.

BY A. SCOTT HENDERSON
ARTWORK BY BRIAN FAULKENBERRY

I love museums. Nevertheless, I have raced through some of the country's most impressive art collections out of circumstantial necessity or unthinking habit. Impatience seems to be wired into our modern DNAs. Worse still, it seems we have become so accustomed to constant interruptions that, according to psychologists, we'll interrupt ourselves—by doing something like surfing the Internet—if there aren't enough external distractions.

As the academic year wound down last May, I started becoming bothered by this impulse. I wondered: What would happen if I focused on whatever experience I was actually having rather than thinking about all the other things I could, or should, be doing?

This question felt critical to me on more than just a personal level, but in a professional sense, too. Deep engagement with ideas is, after all, at the heart of teaching and scholarship at a liberal arts university. It's those skills we believe are also critical to our society's well-being. And so, because the visual arts have always encouraged this type of deep engagement for me, I concocted an experiment: How might five days of unfettered time at a museum reinvent me professionally and personally?

WEDNESDAY, NOON

It's a warm May day when I arrive at the pleasantly cool Greenville County Museum of Art (GCMA) for the first time. Two elderly volunteers greet me with smiles as I enter. They stand near the small gift shop where a patron slowly leafs through a book on French Impressionism.

After consulting the museum map, I decide to start on the first floor, in the Holly Magill Gallery. The gallery—a commodious but welcoming space—features eight paintings known as “Sidney Dickinson and the Alabama Suite,” which concentrates on Dickinson's interest in Southern urbanization and race relations.

Dickinson was a Connecticut-born portraitist who spent much of his career in New York City painting such luminaries as John D.

Rockefeller and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. It seems fitting, however, for me to begin with *Holiday*, Dickinson's self-portrait, completed in 1926 when the artist was 36 years old.

On this large canvas, Dickinson stands in front of an easel on the New York waterfront with his future wife (Mary Watson) seated behind him. Scant rays of light pierce the scene, a Manhattan sunset slowly descending to the horizon. We cannot see what he is painting, which provides an interesting postmodern twist: Is the painter the object or the subject of the painting?

After no more than 30 seconds, however, I feel the tug of the next painting. I realize it's going to be harder than I thought to break old habits. It's as if these works of art are unopened email messages that have accumulated in my inbox. (The reference to emails is germane; a 2012 study concluded that almost three-quarters of work-related emails are attended to within six seconds. I don't like to wait even that long.)

Reminding myself that I have more than six seconds, I shift my focus back to *Holiday*. Forcing myself to look carefully at its canvas, I start to notice things I had missed during my initial half-minute: Dickinson is left-handed and there are four boats in the river—the Hudson, I assume. I also notice how much of the canvas is covered with black paint. This, in turn, recalls something I learned as a college freshman in an art history course. Leonardo da Vinci advised painters to begin all canvases with a wash of black because, according to Leonardo, everything in nature is dark except when it is exposed by light. This painting makes me realize that it's not just nature, but also the artist who shines that light.

I'm lost in these thoughts when a family of four, who arrived seemingly moments ago, exits. They have, by my calculation, looked at 31 paintings in 12 minutes. I am still in front of the same one. In that time, however, something interesting has happened: My fidgetiness is gone. I actually spend 10 more minutes looking at *Holiday*. I'm aware of thinking about certain painting techniques,





DOMESTIC DISTURBANCES

Jamie Wyeth's *Birding* summons a Hitchcock frame of mind in which the sinister is often the familiar.

but I'm also conscious that I'm thinking in a measured, calming manner. To put it another way, I'm actually giving myself time to think, which is often the first casualty of our multitasking lifestyles.

Just as I'm about to move on, something else dawns on me: Because both Dickinson and Mary Watson are looking straight at the viewer, it occurs to me that it must be the viewer that Dickinson is painting on his hidden canvas. The subject we cannot see is, in fact, ourselves. I would have missed this marvelous conceit if I had limited myself to a drive-by view of the painting.

After *Holiday*, I sidle over to Dickinson's next work, *Boy on Horse*, which was painted by the artist in 1918 when he visited the Calhoun School for Colored Children. This school, established under the supervision of Booker T. Washington, was located near Montgomery, Alabama. In the painting, a young adolescent boy sits astride a dappled horse against a dark background. The boy appears to be looking at something behind him, though his body faces forward. I try to get a sense of this painting but without success.

After several more minutes, I realize the boy's coat seems too big for him. Before I know it, I've created a story for the painting. The boy, bundled in his mother's or father's coat, is beginning his journey to the Calhoun School, perhaps as a boarding student. He is moving forward, yet glancing backward, which is how most people confront an uncertain future. By viewing the painting and creating this backstory, I have experienced what the Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi has called "flow." Flow is the experience of effortless concentration that occurs when we are immersed in something. Those who achieve this state notice a diminishment of anxiety, which is likely why my earlier immersion in *Holiday* tended to calm my thoughts.

The last two paintings I view on Wednesday have been paired together by the museum. One is a study that Dickinson did prior to painting the same scene on a second, larger canvas. Both works—titled *Outside Montgomery, Alabama* (1926)—depict a cotton field on the

outskirts of Montgomery. On the horizon, tall buildings rise from downtown Montgomery, a symbol of the city's increasing power as a commercial and financial center.

I spend more than 20 minutes comparing the two works. The most obvious difference is a significant one: A black girl who figures prominently in the first version is absent from the second, despite being the focal point of the former. In the second version, the focal point is the newly built Kilby Prison, which notoriously featured an electric chair.

Given the subject matter of Dickinson's other Alabama paintings, it's hard not to see the racial implications of this modification. Blacks who violated race codes in the Jim Crow South were either killed or imprisoned; by casting a literal light on the prison (recall Leonardo's words), Dickinson was alerting viewers to these realities. As it turns out, he was prescient: Kilby Prison was where the Scottsboro Boys (a group of nine black teenagers wrongly accused of raping two white women) would be held only a few years later.

THURSDAY, 3 P.M.

I'm not surprised at being the only person in the main gallery today. There are few reasons to be inside on a beautiful Southern afternoon unless one wants to take advantage of an exceptional cultural resource. Today, I pass through the entryway, curious about the museum's origins.

The GCMA traces its beginnings to the formation of the Greenville Fine Arts League by 17 local artists in 1935. Funding from the Works Progress Administration supported the League's exhibits through World War II, and in 1963 the South Carolina General Assembly approved creation of the Greenville County Museum Commission. The present building opened in 1974, encompasses almost 70,000 square feet, and welcomes approximately 125,000 visitors each year. Located on the site of the former Greenville Woman's College—absorbed by Furman University in the late 1950s—the



NATIVE SON

A painting from South Carolina artist William McCullough's series exploring the town of Mayesville.

GCMA is part of Heritage Green, a collection of museums, including Furman's own Upcountry History Museum, that surrounds the Greenville Little Theater and the downtown library. Although many area residents favor limited government, the GCMA is a good example of how public dollars can lead to public uplift, which consequently increases our appreciation for why tax revenues are necessary in the first place.

Among other highlights, the GCMA houses the largest public collection of watercolors by the celebrated artist Andrew Wyeth, the best known member of an American family that has produced three generations of noted artists (N.C., Andrew, and Jamie). I decide that is where I'll head today—to view one of the current exhibits on the grandson, "Jamie Wyeth: Our Own Rabelais."

Jamie has been lauded for his portraits and his paintings of Brandywine River locales in Pennsylvania and Delaware. But what I'm interested in is the exhibit's reference to François Rabelais, the 16th-century French satirist whose name is synonymous with robust humor and a bawdy disregard for propriety ("I drink no more than a sponge," he supposedly remarked).

The first painting I view confirms why the reference to Rabelais is appropriate. *Sister Parish and Mr. Universe* (2011) depicts a parlor overlooking a winter landscape. In front of a large window, Mr. Universe flexes his nude body. The only parts of Sister Parish that we can see (she is sitting) are her long-skirted legs. The interior is full of color, notably vernal shades of green that contrast with the snow outside and reinforce the painting's eroticism. Is Mr. Universe a lusty daydream being dreamt by Sister Parish? Whatever the case, the painting seems to be winking at the viewer. It has turned our world of gender assumptions upside down by making a man the object of desire.

The colors in the next canvas, *Easter in Maine* (2008), oppose that of *Sister Parish* and are uncharacteristically dark for a Wyeth painting. This, however, doesn't prevent me from laughing aloud in

the tomb-quiet museum.

In short, a middle-aged mother holds the hands of her two young children at Eastertide. The threesome looks directly at the viewer, as if they have just shown up on our doorstep uninvited. Both children are in bunny suits; the youngest (a boy) is screaming. The mother is smiling, but her expression conveys more hysteria than happiness. Snow flurries dot the painting. The combination of a serious religious observance with an over-commercialized cultural ritual gives the painting its humorous quality. After ruminating on this scene, I conclude that neither spring nor the holiday's end can come soon enough for this besieged mother.

Still bound by my habits of time, I notice that I have also just checked my watch. I have spent more than an hour in front of these three paintings. To put that in perspective, I saw almost every gallery in the Cleveland Museum of Art in the same amount of time. But here's the thing: I can't remember a single painting from that collection.

FRIDAY, 1 P.M.

When I head back to the museum, I decide to keep my strategy of taking in just a handful of works. I return to Jamie Wyeth and his series entitled "A Suite of Untoward Occurrences on Monhegan Island."

Monhegan is a desolate island 12 miles off the coast of Maine. Barely a square mile in area, the island (population 75) has been a favorite destination for artists since the 1800s—Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent, and Frances Kornbluth, among others. Typically, painters use the island's natural light and beauty as their subject matter. But the title of Wyeth's series rightly suggests that he is more interested in events (real or imagined) than with landscapes.

In *The Coop* (2014), a group of four children surrounds several chickens. One of the girls, whose expression is downright evil, appears to have been designated as the poultry executioner. (This reminds me of a couple of faculty meetings I've attended.) *The*



Lobster Bib (2013) is also creepy: A screaming man clad in a lobster bib runs from the Monhegan House Hotel, which is in flames (the incident is based on a 1963 fire). It's a scene that's hard to look at, given the horror inscribed on the man's face and the possibility that other hotel occupants weren't lucky enough to escape.

Still wondering about these unsettling images, I begin my drive home.

The Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman speaks of two kinds of thinking: "fast" (immediate and intuitive) versus "slow" (attentive and purposeful). Each type of mental processing is necessary, but our harried schedules are eating away at the time needed for slow thinking. And this is a problem, because it's fast thinking that frequently gets us into trouble. It fuels our natural tendency to accept ideas and opinions uncritically, particularly ones with which we already agree.

I'm as guilty of this as anybody, not least when I'm responding to student comments during discussions or on written assignments. The slow thinking I'm utilizing to view art has certainly reminded me how important it is to keep fast thinking from overtaking my life, both in and out of the classroom.

SATURDAY, 10 A.M.

Today's goal? To finish viewing the last two paintings in the Monhegan series.

Birding (2014) depicts a field with seven cats in various hunting poses; because there are no birds in the painting, we assume that the cats have either been unsuccessful or extremely successful. (I decide on the second option.) The second canvas, *Sisters* (2015), is the most disturbing one in the series. A girl on a rocky ledge high above the ocean holds an infant in her outstretched arms. Even though the infant sucks her thumb nonchalantly, the older girl has an angry countenance, making the viewer wonder if she's going to throw her sister off the cliff.

The Monhegan series certainly seems to owe more to Alfred Hitchcock than to Rabelais. These paintings convey motion, as if they are single frames from a movie that's been brought to a standstill for our scrutiny. Socrates famously said that an unexamined life is not worth living. Do we ever take enough time in our own motion-filled lives to examine a frame or two? These paintings suggest that we don't, but should.

SUNDAY, 1 P.M.

When I began this experiment five days ago, I dreaded Sunday. What would possibly be left for me to see? But given my new, less peripatetic approach to viewing art, it turns out that I've only scratched the surface of GCMA's collections. On this final day, I want to look at the work of a homegrown artist. I select William McCullough, a South Carolina native known for his realistic portraits and landscapes.

When I first view his three large paintings of Mayesville, South

Carolina (a town of barely 700 people in Sumter County), they appear to be photographs. And this, of course, is the point. From almost the moment the daguerreotype process was created in the 1830s, photographs were heralded as accurate depictions of reality, putatively more objective than the subjective renderings of artists. Through their attention to details and verisimilitude, however, McCullough and other realist painters seem to rebut this claim. In the case of McCullough, his use of lighting and perspective is so natural that I feel as though I've actually walked down streets and visited several Mayesville shops.

I suppose one could argue that these Mayesville streetscapes are a lot like Google Earth, a popular computer application that provides photos of virtually all the inhabited places on Earth (or at least that's the goal). On the other hand, today's college students, including those at Furman, would likely think that a realistic painting is a woefully inadequate substitute for Google Earth. They might be right, but I can't help from feeling that it shouldn't be an either/or choice.

As I leave the museum, it occurs to me that art can provide insights into the new challenges that technology presents. More than 50 years ago, the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan worried that whatever the medium might be, it would have significant effects on the message it conveys, an existential anxiety that McLuhan expressed with the phrase, "The medium is the message." I see a related development among my students on an almost daily basis. They increasingly mistake communicative convenience for communicative competence.

Others share these fears. The cognitive scientist Maryanne Wolf and the technology writer Nicholas Carr have both raised concerns about the impact that electronic texts might be having on our deep-reading skills—our ability to fully absorb and mentally interact with the written word. Could the same be true, I wonder, for our deep-seeing skills? Have digital media eroded our ability to focus on—and thereby truly see—the images we encounter? One thing seems certain: Media such as Twitter and Instagram rarely, if ever, promote deep thinking about anything. That, of course, runs counter to the whole purpose of a liberal arts education, which emphasizes the need for slow thinking (analytical and engaged), rather than fast thinking (casual and intuitive).

Rather than feeling pessimistic, however, I find myself buoyed as my immersion at GCMA comes to a close. In her influential book *Thinking with Things* (2005), the art historian Esther Pasztor posits that "we make things visible so we can understand them." True enough, but visible things don't provide us with any understanding unless we spend more than a few seconds looking at them. **E**

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EASTER MOURNING

Wyeth's *Easter in Maine* offers a humorous satire on the sacred versus the earthbound.