



DIARY OF A DOCENT

THE
MET

Ann Levin recounts her work as a docent at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Part of the training involved her having to pick her favorite works in the institution. She shares her choices and her experiences.



The summer before I started training to be a tour guide at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I spent two solid weeks there, traipsing up and down staircases, riding every elevator, tracking down hundreds of artworks scattered throughout the quarter-mile-long building. It was called a treasure hunt, and it was supposed to be fun, but some days, it felt so overwhelming, I'd ask my husband to come along to help me ferret out objects no bigger than my thumb, or ones tucked away in galleries so rarely visited that dust discreetly collected in the corners.

The idea was to get us tour guides-in-training thinking about the ten objects we'd soon select for our highlight tours, but I was plagued by self-doubt. How was I, a journalist and English major, who had dropped out of Smith College's legendary survey course of Western Art because

I didn't think I could memorize all those slides, possibly be qualified to lead visitors through one of the world's great art museums?

But when classes started in mid-September, I realized that only a couple people in our group of eleven had any formal background in art. Susan was a therapist; Sheila, a librarian; Jeff, a cancer doctor; and Barbara, once a businesswoman, was now in the business of being a grandma.

After training, Susan, Sheila, Barbara, and I would adjourn to the nearby Le Pain Quotidien on Madison Avenue and argue about our Top Ten—the ten must-see works of art for a visitor with only an hour or two to spare in the museum. We did it with the compulsive zeal of sports fans—"I'll trade you my notes on Rembrandt for yours on van Eyck."

By Ann Levin



Above: Amedeo Modigliani, *Reclining Nude*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 23 ⁷/₈ x 36 ¹/₂ in. Below: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Harvesters*, 1565. Oil on wood; overall, including added strips at top, bottom, and right, 46 ⁷/₈ x 63 ³/₄ in.; original painted surface, 45 ⁷/₈ x 62 ⁷/₈ in.

By early October, we had to turn in our first three objects for the trainers' approval. For me, it was a no-brainer: the Kongo Power Figure, a hollowed-out wooden sculpture from Africa, baring its nail-studded chest like the powerlifters in my gym. The Astor Court, serene but otherworldly, a garden without a single flower, just cool

green plants and jagged limestone rocks. And a Tiffany stained-glass window because Louis Comfort Tiffany's wild and exuberant sense of color always reminded me of my interior decorator mother.

Sheila had been trying to get me to do Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's marble sculpture *Ugolino and His Sons* showing the starving,

imprisoned count gnawing his fingers as he considers the unspeakable act of eating his own children. "It's got cannibalism," she enthused. "People will love it!"

But I was busy researching Bruegel's *The Harvesters* because his odd Netherlandish peasants and butterscotch-colored wheat fields always brought tears to my eyes.

I think we all picked things that moved us, within the constraints of museum guidelines. The objects had to be important; represent a diversity of cultures, time periods, and materials; large enough for people to see; and laid out along a logical route. Still, it never ceased to amaze me what people chose: a Colt revolver, a Turkish saber, and the kind of crossbows that became popular after *Game of Thrones*.

We spent a long time trying to talk Barbara out of a Renoir painting of two young girls at a piano. Susan said, "It's so sweet, it makes my teeth hurt."

Sheila, always the diplomat, suggested there were





Above: *The Astor Chinese Garden Court*, 17th-century style. Taihu rocks, granite terrace, ceramic tile flooring, roof tiles, and door frames, various woods (nan wood columns, pine beams, ginkgo latticework), brass fittings Below: Tiffany Studios, attributed to Agnes F. Northrop, *Autumn Landscape*, 1923-24. Leaded Favrite glass, 132 x 102 in..

more important Renoirs to present to museum visitors, such as *Madame Charpentier and Her Children*.

“You could talk about how all of Paris was crazy for Japonisme at the time. And audiences love it when you point out that the kid in the blue-and-white ruffled dress is actually a boy.”

Barbara was unmoved. She was the romantic in the group, drawn to works of art about love, marriage, children, and families. One of the first objects she presented to the class was an 18th-century Rococo sculpture by Jean-Louis Lemoyne of an alluring, half-naked woman fending off Cupid’s arrows. She also did a Greek stele of a little girl saying goodbye to her pet doves—a real heartbreaker—and a painting by the Renaissance artist Fra Filippo Lippi of an elegantly dressed woman standing at a window while her betrothed looks in.

Naturally, Susan, the psychother-



apist, gravitated to works about sex and death. She chose a Chagall painting called *The Lovers* because the Russian-Jewish artist spoke to her immigrant-loving, Yiddische heart. In the picture Chagall embraces his wife, Bella. Through the window you can see fairytale details of Vitebsk, the town in Russia where they were from. It didn’t matter to her a bit if a bunch of art snobs thought Chagall was a lightweight because of all the color and dancing cows and fiddlers on the roof.

Of all the people in the class, Sheila took the mandate to choose highlights the most seriously. Like it was canonical. Like there was such a thing as canonical. Maybe it was a byproduct of sixteen years of Catholic education or her librarian training. But she truly believed in the mythical visitor from a faraway place with an hour to spare who’d feel cheated if she didn’t see the works the museum was most



Left to right: Kongo artist and nganga, Yombe group, *Mangaaka Power Figure (Nkisi N'Kondi)*, Second half of 19th century. Wood, iron, resin, ceramic, plant fiber, textile, pigment; H. 46 ⁷/₁₆ x W. 19 ¹/₂ x D. 15 ¹/₂ in., 53 lbs.; *Marble statue of a kouros (youth)*, ca. 590-580 BCE. Marble, Naxian, 76 ⁵/₁₆ x 20 ⁵/₁₆ x 24 ⁷/₁₆ in.; *Standing Buddha Offering Protection*, late 5th century. Red sandstone, H. 33 ¹¹/₁₆ in., W. 16 ³/₄ in., D. 6 ¹/₂ in.

renowned for. Which, in her opinion, included Goya's *Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga*, or the Red Boy, (in my opinion, meh) and the relief panels from the palace of Ashurnasirpal (fine, but a little severe).

By January, I had eight of my Top Ten but was still dithering over at least a dozen others. I briefly settled on *The Horse Fair* by Rosa Bonheur, a panoramic view of a horse market in Paris in the 1850s, because I admired Bonheur's proto-feminist back story—she'd had to dress up like a man simply to go to the market and sketch undisturbed. But I just didn't love 19th-century realism.

Finally, after weeks of waffling, one of our trainers said to me, "Go with your gut." And suddenly, I felt liberated to add the picture I'd been wanting to do all along: Modigliani's *Reclining Nude*. He'd been my favorite since college, when I used to get stoned and stare at the poster over my bed of a different nude, *La Belle Romaine*, taking comfort in the girth of her enormous left thigh and listening to Marvin Gaye croon *Let's Get It On*.

The last work I selected was *Samson Captured by the Philistines* by the 17th-century Italian artist Guercino. I didn't love it, but my trainer listed its advantages.

"First of all, it's big, so everyone will be able to see it. Second, it's *Delilah*," she said, emphasizing the name of the Old Testament figure known for her acts of seduction and betrayal. "Finally, it's

got a bench in front of it, and people will be tired at this point in your tour."

Meanwhile, Jeff was struggling. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said on the first day of class that he had applied to the program to relax from his high-pressure job in a hospital. Even after it became clear how much work it was going to be, he just wasn't willing to adapt.

As the year went on, we watched in dread as time after time he flamed out in practice sessions in front of his cherished objects—Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*, Noguchi's *Kouros*, Monet's *Garden at Sainte-Adresse*. It was especially awful because we all knew how good he could have been if only he'd applied himself.

One night our class had a training in front of Georges de La Tour's *The Fortune-Teller*, a 17th-century painting of a wizened old fortune-teller reading a rich young man's palm while, unbeknownst to him, her beautiful young confederates steal his watch and jewelry.

We had to study the painting for a few minutes, then different people volunteered to put on a blindfold and describe it in detail. Here was the lesson we learned that night: that we saw almost nothing and remembered even less. Most of us didn't even notice that the man was being robbed. We were distracted by the other peo-

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK: PURCHASE: LILA ACHESON WALLACE, DRS. DANIEL AND MARIAN MALCOLM; LAURA G. AND JAMES J. ROSS; JEFFREY B. SOREN; THE ROBERT T. WALL FAMILY; DR. AND MRS. SIDNEY G. CLYMAN, AND STEVEN KOSKAR GIFTS, 2008 (2008.30); FLETCHER FUND, 1932 (32.11.1); PURCHASE; ENDI A. HAUPT GIFT, 1979 (1979.6)

ple in the picture, just like the man was. We didn't even know how many figures were in the frame or what they were wearing, even though their costumes were extraordinary, with sumptuously worked collars, sleeves, bonnets, and sashes.

For me, it was just a dazzling array of color—gorgeous swaths of pinks and orange and salmon and gold. But not for Jeff. He immediately homed in on the old woman's fingers. "She has arthritis!" he declared, pointing out her deformed thumb and swollen knuckles.

Why were we willing to do the drudge work when he wasn't? Because at some point most of us had been the straight-A student, the class monitor, the teacher's pet—the kid, despised by nearly everyone except the teacher, who habitually turned in projects for extra credit. It never would have occurred to us not to follow directions, intent as we were on proving we were the best. We never assumed we could just stand next to *Gertrude Stein*, as Jeff did, and say, "Isn't this freaking awesome?"

The day I passed my audit in May, I was ecstatic. My husband sent me a huge bouquet of flowers. But after the exhilaration came the dread—the fear of screwing up, being wrong, forgetting everything I'd learned. Although officially I wouldn't be on the schedule until the fall, I signed up to give tours over the summer and recited my tour everyday in the kitchen, standing in front of the refrigerator.



To some extent, my efforts paid off. By the time the next September rolled around, the words to my Top Ten flowed like lyrics to a song—with my remaining choices being the Greek Kouros (of course!); a Louis XVI room in the Wrightsman Galleries; the *Standing Buddha Offering Protection*, a late 5th-century sculpture from India; and the Bis Poles, a collection of wooden sculptures by the Asmat people in New Guinea. But every now and then, imposter syndrome came flooding back. Was I really qualified to lead tours at the Met because I'd once hung a Modigliani poster in my dorm room and a Bruegel made me cry?

Turns out the answer was yes. I had to believe that most people who came on our tours didn't really care that Guercino was born in 1591 or that Modigliani died when he was 35. They were drawn to these grand public spaces for the same reasons that I was—we wanted to be shattered and repaired, lifted up and knocked down, troubled and consoled.

We wanted to be invisible, we wanted to be seen. We wanted to feel, *you must change your life*. We wanted to feel, *your life is okay*. We wanted the sensation of pleasure, the cessation of pain. We wanted to be swept up into some larger enterprise, cleansed and improved, and restored to our authentic selves. 🎨



Above: Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), *Samson Captured by the Philistines*, 1619. Oil on canvas, 75 ¼ x 93 ¼ in.

Below: *Boiserie from the Hôtel Lauzun*, ca. 1770, with one modern panel. Carved and painted oak, H. 323 ½ x W. 323 ½ x D. 195 ¼ in.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. CHARLES WRIGHTMAN, 1984 (1984.459.2); THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, PURCHASE, MR. AND MRS. CHARLES WRIGHTMAN GIFT, 1976 (1976.91.1)