

The Boston Fine Arts Museum

Art has a way of seeping into your soul. It provides an anchor or an icon for an experience, outlook, or stage in a person's life. This has certainly been true for me. And, the introduction to art is a privilege granted to a parent who is aware of the impact it can make on the open canvas of a young child's life.

My mother impacted me more than she knew by simply taking me and my siblings to the St. Louis Art Museum occasionally when I was an elementary school student. I recall only one object d'art during those visits, but it has affected me for all of my life since. The piece of art was, "The Stairs to Nowhere." It's a three-dimensional structure consisting of a set of stairs spiraling one story upward to a landing, leading to nowhere. I don't recall any interpretation given at the time, but it has haunted me all my life. I suppose I should read about the original artist and his intention for the piece, but not knowing seems to satisfy some primal need for lack of resolution in me.

I think of the "Stairs to Nowhere," from time to time and consider what it could mean, without an "official interpretation." Could it be a commentary on the futility of life, or a skeptical visualization of the transition from this world to heaven, or, possibly, a critique of the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Japan, ending WWII? I don't know what the artist intended and preferred to keep my occasional musings about its significance to myself until now.

This piece of art also reminds me to introduce my children and grandchildren to artists and their works. During our summer in Boston in 1985, our family had seen most of the touristy things and were looking for something significant to do one rainy Saturday in August before leaving for home the next week. My wife, Jeannette, had been informed by her friend Susan Cohen, who was a resident of Boston, and many years later became a docent at the Boston Fine Art Museum (BFAM), that we might like to visit it if we had opportunity. So, we spent several hours viewing the colonial-era furniture, and paintings by Renoir and Sargent. It was partly this visit that developed the love for impressionist art that she and I have had ever since.

We saw the original painting of "Dance at Bougival," by Pierre Renoir, probably the piece most prized by the BFAM, and numerous portraits by Sargent, the most active and well-known American portrait painter of Boston. The other painting, we were most impressed with, was a portrait of George Washington and his horse, painted by the artist as a commentary on Washington's refusal to pay him.

The art and the artists became real to us during our visit to the BFAM. For example, we learned why George Washington's horse had his rear facing the viewer rather than face-on, or mounted like his more famous renderings. For some reason, the Father of Our Country refused to pay the artist for his painting, so the head of the horse was erased and replaced with his gigantic rump as a commentary on George's parsimony. I had known artists held strong political opinions but had not realized before that they extended to economic commentary.

Jeannette and I frequently visited art galleries when we traveled, after our trip to Boston, because we loved impressionist art, and it was fascinating to study the lives of the artists and some of the history of their works. We enjoyed the San Diego Art Museum, the Los Angeles Art Museum, the Simon Norton Art Gallery in Pasadena, and the Getty Art Museum, all in Southern California. We were first introduced to Caravaggio at the Simon Norton Gallery and Rodin at the Los Angeles Art Museum.

We also had the privilege of visiting several galleries in London, Paris, and Rome. We were frustrated by not getting to see some of the world's best known impressionist art at the Musee' d'Orsay, because most of the best pieces were out on loan to other galleries while we were there in 2005. However, we were more than amply rewarded for our time in the Louvre.

In addition to original pieces by Renoir, Monet, Manet, Cassatt, Caravaggio, Picasso, Degas, and many other famous painters, and sculptors, I was particularly impressed by the "Mona Lisa". I remember viewing the "Mona Lisa" along one wall of a huge gallery, filled with hundreds of people trying to jockey as close to the painting as possible. After working my way to the front of the crowd and glimpsing the painting for as long as I felt was reasonable, without angering others trying to capture my vantage point, I turned and worked my way through the confusion to the back of the room.

I hadn't moved twenty feet when I glanced this gigantic painting ahead of me, near the back wall, that dwarfed any painting in any art gallery I had visited anywhere. I vaguely recognized it but didn't fully realize what it was until I read the caption to one side of the painting. Few people were viewing it. Most were faced in the other direction, either waiting for an opportunity to dart into a gap closer to the "Mona Lisa", or waiting for a friend to return from visiting "her."

Later, when I thought about the relative interest for the subjects in the two paintings, I couldn't help but compare the clamor and excitement between the crowds looking at the two paintings. A metaphorical symbolism cried out to be expressed by the attention given to the two paintings.

The canvas before me in the back of the room was enormous. It was probably thirty feet wide and twenty feet high. The characters in the painting wore exotic renaissance clothing and overflowed an outdoor porch with ornate columns, pools, and fountains. Food and drink filled platters, and servants were in abundance.

One central person dominated the scene, overshadowing the bride and groom of the wedding party. The impression was opulence, indulgence, and aristocracy. This was the famous painting, "The Wedding at Cana!"

I was "blown away" by the painting! It in no way, looked like the image I had of the biblical, "Wedding at Cana," I had envisioned most of my life. It was too big, too gaudy, in the wrong era, and displayed a wedding party fit more for a king and his court, than a family event in a small, Galilean village Palestine, I had always imagined. The license the artist used to visualize Christ's first miracle seemed to do violence to the entire episode. Since that experience in the Louvre, I've become more skeptical and distrusting of artistic renditions of religious subjects.

But, we not only visited museums, we bought a few reproductions and an original piece of art in Mendocino, California during a family trip to the North Coast. We had been considering purchasing such a piece for several years, but we couldn't agree on the "tone." Jeannette liked bright, happy scenes and I liked dark, somber ones. We finally agreed on a painting of a wave curling as it approached a California beach with rocky outcrops nearby. The reason we were able to agree to this purchase was because it appeared sunny and bright when illuminated with a lamp, and dark and mysterious when not illuminated.

Later, after moving to Camano Island, Washington, we became friends with several artists on the Island who were known for their art locally and, even internationally. One of our favorites is Anne Dorsey who paints impressionist beach scenes of children. She uses her grandchildren as subjects.

One day while visiting her home gallery, I had the temerity to ask if she would be willing to paint under commission a rendering of our youngest daughter, Laura, and me, from a small photograph my friend, Dan Iles, had taken of us some thirty years before. We were photographed picking up pebbles along the Bear River in the Sierra Nevada foothills during a camping trip together.

Anne agreed to take the commission, if I would agree to a minor change in the picture. She asked to be allowed to reverse my position, so that I was stooping toward Laura rather than turned away from her. The artist's sense of composure worked. Her impressionist painting is one of my favorites, hanging on the wall of my daughter's home.

We also own a favorite painting made of our home on Camano Island by my good friend, Marvin Ross. Marvin was the artist in residence for over thirty years at the Institute for Creation Research. He worked as the Institute's commercial artist, producing many book covers, graphic designs, and paintings in the Museum of Biblical and Earth History.

Marvin always wanted to be a "Fine Artist," however. When he had time, he would paint beautiful impressionist paintings of natural scenes, people, and objects. I loved his work and several times offered to buy some of his paintings.

After he retired, his son paid for a trip to Paris where he spent a month sketching scenes along the Seine and throughout the city. I can't imagine how much he must have enjoyed being in the "City of the Artists." When I saw his sketches, I wanted to buy at least one of them, they were so good. But, Marvin had one serious flaw as an artist. He couldn't countenance the thought of selling any of his art, not even his sketches!

When he and his wife, Nancy, came to visit us a few years later on Camano Island, to make up for my disappointment at not being able to purchase one of his

many masterpieces, he offered to "paint my house." He did an impressionistic version of my home which he gave me, and I treasure today.

Art is much more than an investment. It's a "touchstone" with people, places and ideas. I strongly encourage you to participate in art and teach your family to enjoy it as well. Here's to beauty!