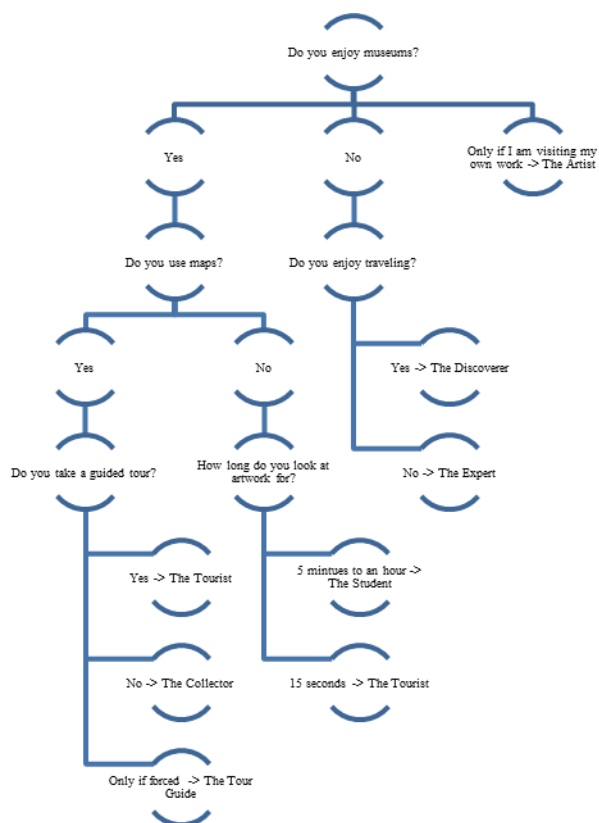


A Trip Through Perspective

Introduction: Perspective

Welcome to the gallery! This museum differs from others. Rather than expecting you to wander aimlessly through our halls, we offer a guide that will help you to take the most out of the works here. We strive to enforce the importance of perspective. Based upon the life one leads, perspective differs, and can be a way of observing something - with or without certain biases. To help you find out your current perspective please fill out the short quiz below. If you are not entirely thrilled with your results, feel free to read the remainder with the help of two social critics who will accompany you throughout your tour. Walker Percy and John Berger will help you gain insight from what you see.¹ These men share some opinions, but have extremely different sentiments regarding other aspects. The guide follows the quiz and is a means to enhance your trip through your perspective in our museum. Be open to change and enjoy your day!



1. The Discoverer

Imagine you have spent the day wandering the coast of Maine. It is dusk and you are about to turn around and return to your car. Suddenly, however, you stumble upon an abandoned farmhouse and decide to look around. Walking up the stairs you see a painting nailed to the wall, covered in cobwebs and dust so thick you have to brush it off with your shirtsleeve to glimpse what lies beneath. At first, it seems a bit dull, so you pull it off the wall. Holding it up to the little bit of light shining through the window, you can see the image clearly for the first time. Perplexed you see a girl, alone, sitting in a field. More amazing is the house in the distance that seems to be her fixation. It looks so familiar, taking only a few seconds you recognize the house you are standing in². The old dilapidated house full of dust and cobwebs was at one time an object of great desire. You have found “it”. For decades, you tell the story about the painting that hangs above your fireplace and pass it on as a family heirloom to your children. Who knows who painted it or why, you found it and it is wonderful.

Walker Percy would agree; you discovered “it”³ and you prove your discovery to none. Had you taken that picture to an art collector and asked about it, he would have told you that you were going to be very rich⁴. Instead, you put your concern in concealing your find, much like Walker Percy suggests to an archaeologist in ‘Loss of the Creature’. Instead of putting his find in a museum, Percy advises that he, “Would have done better to keep it in his pocket and show it now and then to strangers,” (Percy 470). You have managed to follow this procedure of *discrete* discovery to perfection. Even your children, to whom you told the story and passed on the painting, will never see what you saw in that gloomy abandoned house. Percy cites a similar experience had by the tourists who visited the Grand Canyon, “Does not one of them see the same sight from the Bright Angel Lodge that Cárdenas saw?” (Percy 459). No one would ever

see the same picture that you saw. It would simply be impossible, the experience you had was individual and you managed to keep it to yourself. For you the painting is not the product of a reproduction; its meaning is intact. As the discoverer it is your perspective that is true and without unnatural bias.

SPACE INTENTIONALLY
LEFT BLANK



2. The Expert

Glancing at the painting sitting in the corner of your office you blink once and turn back to your notes. The painting you spent the past week going over with a magnifying glass elicits little reaction. You hardly remember a time when you did not examine Wyeth paintings for a living. Your eyes instantly examine the brushstrokes: where they are longer, shorter, where they seem to fade into the distance, and where they are prominent. Taking a magnifying glass to the field, which you know contains several unnoticeable flaws the MoMA asked Wyeth to add to ensure the painting's future security, you continue with your notes. After answering the auction house's call and informing them that the painting indeed was Wyeth's, you cover the painting with a white sheet.

The piece is a famous work of art, but your concern is not the work itself. Your job is to discern what the value of the piece is when it goes up for auction at Sotheby's next month⁶. In John Berger's words you will be dealing, "With who commissioned the painting (no one), legal squabbles, who owned it (MoMA), its likely date (1948)," (Berger 150). You have no thoughts regarding the painting's content; simply put, your job is to establish its authenticity. There is no

actual feeling behind your work, only facts and numbers. In Percy's opinion, you are lost and can never see what once was beautiful.

Are you necessarily at fault? When viewing a painting do you have any control over your first reaction? Percy does not believe so, "The caste of the layman-expert is not the fault of the expert. It is due altogether to the eager surrender of sovereignty by the layman," (465). You are simply doing your job, but in doing this job you have lost the ability to ever look at a painting and see it for its genuine meaning. You can see only the valuable qualities the painting possesses, its price. Does this mean you are joining the ranks within a caste system? Has your viewpoint become constricted and consequently restricted all other viewpoints? Just for a second close your eyes... try to ignore the figures that appear above every stroke of the painting. Now open your eyes and simply look at what sits upon an easel in the corner of your office.

3. The Collector

The moment you walk into the painting rooms at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) you see dozens of people crowded around trying to get a glimpse of the famous *Christina's World* by Wyeth. You are so inclined to make *this* painting your own. Without any idea if the painting is for sale you ask to see the curator. You speak of your desire for the painting and he laughs and tells you to buy a copy in the gift shop. For a moment, you are angry and then your face softens; you did not really want it anyway you realize. Who needs a masterpiece when a print is just as good?

Is the print "just as good"? Had you suggested this to Percy he would have laughed in your face and asked if you read Shakespeare in high school English class⁷. "A student who has the desire to get at...a Shakespeare sonnet may have the greatest difficulty in salvaging the creature...he is not aware that there is a difficulty...(he thinks) in such a fine classroom, with

such a fine textbook, the sonnet must come across,” (Percy 466). You show such an inclination for art you have blossomed into the classic consumer that Percy so despises. Do you enjoy the work or do you just want the package that all of the museumgoers seemed to enjoy? Berger may have a slightly less haughty opinion of you or maybe not. As Berger mentions reproduced art he recognizes that, “In the age of pictorial reproduction the meaning of paintings is no longer attached to them; their meaning becomes transmittable,” (Berger 153). Through this definition, the collector should still be able to retain some of the relevance of the painting in its copy. Still, the collector should be aware that placing a reproduction, or even the original, in their home something is lost. By placing the painting out of its original context its meaning can be lost. Then again, does the painting belong in a museum? Is the reason that art in museums seems so “blah” because you walk in to an entire room full of art that looks so similar? Perhaps you, the collector, allow the painting to be incomparable by masking it from the world. This may be a new way of looking at the piece: it is original, incomparable. You will reawaken the painting similar to the Mona Lisa receiving its own reawakening in a single occupancy room at the Louvre.

4. The Tour Guide

How many times a day could tours possibly want to travel through the museum? You have seen every kind of person walk by the painting of the girl in the field and you have told them all about it. Over and over repeated yourself, her story, how Wyeth became famous after this painting was completed, everything down to the fact that he is buried in the same cemetery as his subject. Thinking of the last time you looked at the painting you decide that while you deliver the monotonous script prepared by some source you look. Instantly you recognize the familiarity of the painting, the young woman with tensed arms as she tries to pull herself through

the field to the house so far in the distance. Her legs taken by Polio, a common disease of the period renders her paralyzed, forced to drag herself upon her arms. The lifelong struggle she endured is represented by the sheer distance between her current position and the house; this is *Christina's World*.

It is your job to provide the consumerist package that is so attractive to the 21st Century person. Can you reclaim the sovereignty strip from you daily? After the associations you have made with the painting, can it be recovered? You have entered a realm that allows you to both have the information and apply it if you so choose. Percy cannot deny that your experience is genuine; you have not proven yourself to anyone, you have managed to be enlightened in a world against you. Berger cannot argue that you care about the value of the painting or are not viewing it in the proper setting. The only question that remains is whether or not you view the painting through the eyes of all the people you have guided. Does it only hang on the wall? Is it there to provide the money for your paycheck? If you are able to harness the information you monotonously deliver to visitors seven times a day and rather than reciting it in your mind, you strive to find the elements of which you speak. You have the chance to, in the words of Percy, "Struggle to recover a sight," (Percy 471). Should you struggle finding purity in your perspective you may find more than a painting that you lead a crowd past daily.

5. The Student

You, the ever-eager student wander in to the museum one morning and confront a painting by none other than Andrew Wyeth. Wyeth is one of the most famous American artists of the 20th Century. Does this matter? Not to you. You view the painting with an open mind simply trying to understand. Likely accompanying you on your trip to the museum is some sort of guide or book. Percy would strongly object to this manner of behavior - a guide provides a

means of accepting another's interpretation. Why do you need assistance in determining something that relies on only your own interpretation? Are you lacking sovereignty⁸? No, you seek to understand; you choose to learn from a person who may or may not have a mind superior to your own. Berger would encourage your aptness to learn, to an extent. According to Berger, images and paintings especially in the past are, "A record of how X had seen Y," (Berger 143). In this painting, you mean to understand how the painter came about his image. Of course, the artist wants each person to apply the painting's meanings to their own experiences, but there is a more direct message received from the source, Wyeth.

Is the painting issuing a message of pessimism? The somber colors, the feeling of forlorn in every muscle of the girl, the loneliness of the life journey - each quality echoes the flaws of the human conscience. In another light, the painting offers a sense of hope. The colors are not somber; they are muted and calming. The forlorn attitude encompassing the girl is not forlorn, but determined. The empty field is not loneliness; it is a vast sea of opportunity. You can observe the painting in a way that Wyeth himself viewed the painting. Observe in a way that is unaffected, only interpretive. Bias is not necessarily a bad thing if it comes from the appropriate source and you interpret it in a way that is representative of the self. Do not look at the painting as a work of art. Look at it as though it is a piece of someone; he has revealed his soul to you, accept it and learn from it. Do not *consume* the painting, dissect it. Make the painting your own; use the guidebook⁹ to help you attach meaning that is so easily lost.

6. The Tourist

You have decided either on your own or against your will to visit yet another museum on your jaunt through New York City. This stop is the MoMA. According to guidebooks, it is one of the most comprehensive modern art museums in the world. Quickly picking up a map

illustrating the various stops you can make throughout the museum, you locate all bathrooms and the primary source of tourist enjoyment, the gift shop. As you follow the throngs of people in front of you, through the vast halls and white rooms, you gaze up at the walls blankly. This painting is similar to the last...dozen. Bored, you step into the next room, and see a painting alone on a wall next to the window. There is a short barrier and several people between you and the painting. You spend the average fifteen seconds gazing at the painting. All you see is a vast field with a single female occupant. Then you move on. Two minutes later, you return after reconsidering the oddity of the figure. Although frowned upon by the museum, you reach into your pocket, grab your cell phone and snap a quick picture¹⁰.

What have you done? Was it impossible to spend five more minutes looking at the picture? Now you have not only witnessed the girl trapped by the vast field, but you committed her to a life in your cell phone. Not to mention, on your way out you picked up the fridge magnet of the painting so that every time you go to get milk you remember the strained look of the girl. According to Berger, "The camera...destroyed the idea that images were timeless," (148). Wyeth managed to create a universal image of the struggles people overcome to survive. Is there any message more timeless? While you were in the museum, did you think to look at the inscription under the painting? If you had, you would have read, "The woman crawling through the tawny grass was the artist's neighbor in Maine, who, crippled by polio, 'was limited physically but by no means spiritually,'" (MoMA). This simple input from Wyeth makes you reconsider the magnet on your refrigerator. Does Berger approve of the informed method of seeing? "When the art of the past ceases to be viewed nostalgically, the works will cease to be holy relics," (Berger 157). Until the day retrieving milk from the fridge does not fill you with a

well of nostalgia in the pit of your stomach, Berger cannot argue that the magnet is a destruction of a masterpiece.

7. The Artist

Every day I sit and watch visitors travel through my exhibitions; I act as the silent observer. I am not only observing my paintings but also contemplating peoples' reactions to my paintings. This is my main concern. I know what my art reflects; I would rather see how people interpret my feelings.

Shortly before beginning *Christina's World*, my father passed away. After his death, I never again used the same color pallet. The bright colors seemed to mock the existence of suffering. The field never existed; I made it up. I wanted to illustrate Christina's trials of everyday life. She did not have the use of her legs and refused to use a wheelchair, so she crawled (Esaak)¹¹. I watched her for many summers from the window of my kitchen, as she crawled through her garden picking flowers. I finally painted her as a child when she was in her fifties; my wife posed for me and I painted Christina. Before the piece was finished, I knew that it was my best work. I am the creator. Can you ever have more knowledge of the meaning of my work than I do? Is it possible for you to take more than I provided? Do you see what I see?¹²

In this case, neither Berger nor Percy has anything to say. You have surpassed their areas of expertise. You consumed nothing; you created it. Once you take what the creator offered and build upon it, you are greater than the advice Percy and Berger can offer. Creation may be the only way of really recovering sovereignty. Bias cannot infiltrate creation; it is the purest form of self-expression and yet Berger and Percy each ignore creation as a means for the recovery of self or the destruction of consumerism. Each author focuses on the criticisms of

society without offering the root problem. People of today lack original thoughts. There is far too much concern with the surrounding world and not enough concern in maintaining sovereignty or recovering it when it inevitably is lost.

Epilogue: Leaving the Museum

We hope your trip was interesting. These perspectives, while applicable to a day in an art museum, are applicable in so many other settings. The idea that there is one way to approach life is flawed. There are hundreds of ways – mentioned above are only a few – to interpret and understand any situation. Berger and Percy do not attempt to open your eyes to a new way of life, but throw your current state under a bus. Society is hopelessly floundering in its attempts to rectify human existence. What is an experience without a way to recognize its presence? The innate ability of the human race to ignore all of the masterpieces that exist on this planet is uncanny. Whether it is: a painting in a museum or a cave, the Grand Canyon, a piece of literature that should have the ability to rip one's heart out, or a young girl crawling through a garden picking flowers; there is majesty in front of you every day that goes unnoticed. The strategies listed above offer mere suggestions that may or may not allow a broken society to reclaim sovereignty lost for many years. Take the suggestions and see that you can apply them and note the difference in your own human experience. At some times you may feel undirected and that is okay; life means to *fulfill*... if only you choose to accept.¹³

Endnotes

¹ John Berger and Walker Percy are experts in their fields, a title that Percy frowns upon. These men each pass judgment and then provide advice for their readers regarding how to handle a world that favors the consumer.

² Wyeth's painting never lost in an old house, sold for \$1,800 to the MoMA several weeks after he finished painting.

³ Percy frequently refers to the “it” experience often in his work. Everyone searches for this genuine, life changing experience. An example is Cardenas seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time.

⁴ When *Christina's World* had its last cleaning, an appraiser valued it at about 1.8 million dollars.

⁵ This is my opportunity to speak about the painting from my own perspective rather than that of the narrator. There are several reasons I chose to include *Christina's World* as the focus of this brochure. I believe the use of the piece is a critique of Percy's essay “The Loss of the Creature”. Within his work, he chose to exclude American artists as well as any postmodern or contemporary works. In this way, I believe his piece is somewhat partial. I did mimic the style of photograph incorporation used by Walker Percy in his essay. The photograph of the painting included is small and in greyscale. The placement of the photograph is essential to the understanding of the idea of perspective. The reader should not see any rendering of the painting before reading the section regarding discovery. At the moment of discovery, the finder should have all control over the image. After the initial contact with the painting, the reader may see a sample of the painting because it no longer has the initial value; from this point, they will only see reproductions. I visited *Christina's World* two years ago and her mere presence in the field was enough to make me reconsider the world I live in. Pay special attention to Christina's arms, they always struck me.

⁶ Sotheby's does not have the painting; it will not be for sale any time soon.

⁷ Percy advocates against the normal educational package that traditional school systems deliver to students.

⁸ Lacking sovereignty is an allusion to Percy. He speaks of the loss of self quite often, more often however about how to reclaim it. The loss of sovereignty is the purposeful or accidental loss of self-opinion.

⁹ Both Berger and Percy frown upon the guidebook, but I find that it can be a valuable resource if used correctly. However, it is definitely a source that one should regard with care. Make the guidebook a supplemental source rather than a map telling you what to see and when to see it.

¹⁰ Berger speaks of a photograph splitting the meaning of an image in to hundreds of pieces, “Its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings,” (Berger 148). This is the result of taking the photograph. When the tourist takes the picture, it enters their home and takes on new meanings after life surrounds it, “Its meaning is diversified,” (Berger 149).

¹¹ Some of this text I based upon the work by Shelley Esaak, an art historian. As the author, I have chosen to elaborate upon her musings regarding Wyeth's work, post the death of his father, in an emotional sense. I have tried to create a connection between Wyeth and the reader in order to decrease the outsider perspective. The reader is allowed in to Wyeth's mind and therefore is in an insider.

¹² The perspective of the artist changes the viewpoint of the guide. An outsider no longer writes their position; it is that of an insider.

¹³ I wrote this guide in such a way not meant to instruct, but to lead one to discover for one's self. Percy and Berger make it clear that instruction leads one down a path that might as well have you attached to a leash, able to see only

the periphery the walker allows. In this way, the men contradict the very means by which they instruct (a book or essay format). This contradiction makes me believe there is not a possibility the human race can regain sovereignty without any instruction; we are too lost, led astray by a self-inflicted society. Reading this guide will not provoke a further loss of sovereignty. It is with my utmost hope that you gain ways to recover the sovereignty so easily lost.

Citations

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