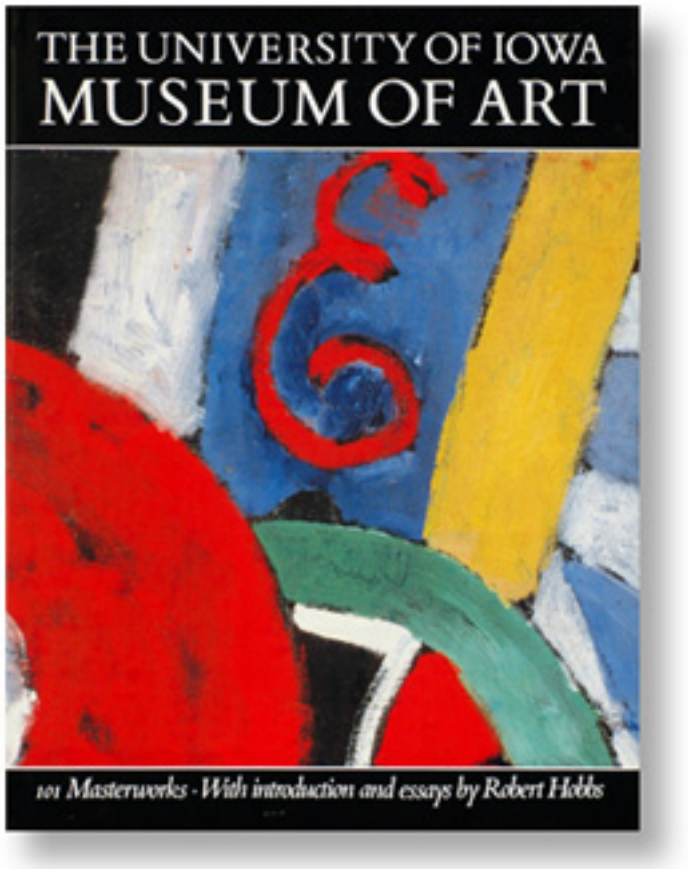


"Introduction: Telling Fragments." *In The University of Iowa Museum of Art: 101 Masterworks*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa Museum of Art [Distributed by University of Washington Press], 1986; pp. 9-11.

# *Introduction: Telling Fragments*

This catalogue of 101 masterworks from the permanent collection of The University of Iowa Museum of Art is an attempt to put a museum between covers, so that its most important works of art become an occasion for examining the meaning of a masterwork in our culture and for understanding the role that significant art should play in museums in the future.

Because there are distinct limits to the art now available in private collections and on the market, museums need to rethink their role. No longer can relatively new institutions hope to form encyclopedic collections to demonstrate the course art has taken through the ages. The phrase "filling in the gaps in the collection," though it is still being used, is misdirected. An art museum is not a natural history museum, and it should not try to account for the equivalent of phylum, class, order, genus, species.

A work of art is a special revelation. It is an act of faith by someone who is trying to define the way reality feels at a specific moment. And a great work of art is an even more courageous act, because the artist is attempting not only to discern the felt tone of his or her time, but to heighten the reality of that time by projecting an intuitive feeling for what life can become and especially what it can feel like.

People have always laughed and cried, dreamed and fought and loved, but the manner in which they have done so changes over time. Early-twentieth-century jokes, for example, express a distinctly different orientation toward the world from our own. Humor can be ribald, slapstick, black, ironic, or deadpan. And even though each era manifests all types of humor to some degree, there is usually one kind of joke that best recreates the feeling of an entire time and place—and what is true for humor is also true for art. A great work of art is a telling fragment.

A telling fragment is a piece of history, taken out of time and placed on the walls of a museum where it can also be regarded as decorative and universally relevant. Such remnants can be merely beautiful, or they can become magical devices for making significant journeys. Every truly important work of art is capable of choreographing the action of its beholder in some specific way. A Schongauer print (p. 165) demands concentration and scrutiny of every detail; it makes looking a dedicated act. In contrast, Degas's etching of Mary Cassatt (p. 145), while seeming to require close examination, in fact provides the viewer with a carefully constructed casual glance and nothing more, thus placing the serious observer in the position of a disinterested spectator. Max Beckmann's *Karneval* (p. 55) forces the viewer to step back and consider its three panels as a modern-dress version of a religious scene. It plays on contradictory assumptions about art: art as sacred and formal, but also as secular and intimate.

The Irving Penn photograph (p. 137) also implies contradictory forms of orientation: the overall image is aggrandized and presented in the closed world of high fashion with which Penn is familiar, while the subject—a New Guinea tribesman—is extracted from another and entirely different closed world. Taken out of his natural environment, the New Guinea tribesman in Penn's photograph forces us to analyze how we see and how vision can be programmed. We look at another culture through the high-fashion lens of our own, and we experience discomfort as if something is not quite right. This forced examination of the social and cultural lens through which we see is an important aspect of art.

Looking at a work of art takes time. A few years ago the staff of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City conducted a survey to find out exactly how much time people spent with a work of art. To their amazement they discovered that the average viewer took only three seconds for each piece, and part of that time was spent reading labels. Obviously, other art forms, such as music, theater, literature, and poetry, require more than a casual glance and an instant of recognition in order to reveal their contents. Works of art actually require far more time than most people are accustomed to spend with them.

Strangely enough, in the voluminous literature on art that has been published in the past few decades, there is little information about individual works of art except for the short-lived Art in Context series. Most information is what one might categorize as positivist: a description of what the viewer can already see, circumstantial evidence, and incidental biographical information. As a way of testing the amount of information available about individual works, I have assigned students the task of surveying the literature on one or another specific work of art. A student who examined Paul Gauguin's masterpiece *Nevermore* reported that she could find in the literature only a few paragraphs that dealt casually with the iconography of the work, and even that information was buttressed with anecdotes about Gauguin's search for a modern-day paradise. There was no mention of Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*, or of that poem's importance to the Symbolist movement in France, or of Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's fascination with Poe, or even of the strange details in the painting, which include a blackbird, a tapestry, background figures, and an anxious nude figure. Neither was there any analysis of the relationship of *Nevermore* to Gauguin's equally famous *Manao Tupapau* (The Spirit of the Dead Watches).

Art history has its place, but too many students of art history appear to be afraid of veering into criticism, and they remain content with pursuing verifiable information. It is also important, I think, to expand our knowledge of what art is, how it functions in the world, what systems of value it assumes, and how it coaxes us and at times maneuvers us so that we become a specific type of viewer—an intimate or a voyeur, a judge or sometimes an initiate into a new concept of reality.

It is not enough that museums now provide viewers with descriptive labels that recount the myths, biblical tales, and historic events that many works of art commemorate. Although that is a good beginning, such an approach can become absolutist because it assumes that looking at a work of art is merely a process of recognition and a confirmation of known facts and established perceptions. Such an approach provides little room for thought, for questioning the possible meanings of art.

Labels containing only a description of the art object are important as identifiers, but insofar as they seem to speak for the work of art they are also problematic. Of the three seconds that the average viewer spends looking at an individual work, the label takes at least one second and sometimes two. Speaking the high-tech language of information science, of cold type, and of unquestioned authority, the labels in our museums answer the most obvious questions and, just as important, help to forestall less obvious but more interesting ones.

To counteract this undisputed authority of museum labels, the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers created a work of art in the form of an exhibition that included images of eagles used in art from ancient times. In his *Museum*, which was exhibited at the Städtische Kunsthalle of Düsseldorf in 1972, Broodthaers's "Section des figures" was entitled *The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present Day*. The label for each object stated in English, German, and French, "This is not a work of art," to indicate that art is part of a symbolic structure and not just an isolated object. The eagles were divided into obvious, logical categories, such as stuffed eagles, eagles on coats of arms, and eagles on labels of wine bottles or match boxes. Broodthaers's point was that a work of art can never truly be an isolated masterpiece; that it is always a telling fragment.

A work of art is an auto-focusing lens that alters one's way of seeing it. One may have to assume genius in order to find genius, to relax and let the work divulge its meaning. To look at the Jackson Pollock *Mural* (pp. 116–17), it is necessary to stand close to the painting and be surrounded by the apocalyptic environment it creates. To come to terms with Robert Michel's sensibility (p. 43) is to understand how people once needed to believe in the idea of technological progress. And to comprehend Motherwell's *Elegy* (pp. 106-7), one has to recognize that abstract tensions between yielding organic forms and implacable verticals can become Rorschachs, emblematic of the unresolved tensions of the Cold War. Looking can be rational and analytic; it can also be discomforting and emotional.

Important works of art do not simply reflect life; they invent it. They contain within themselves deep understandings of reality and ways of dealing with conflict. Works of art often are capable of keeping contradictions in suspension, placing them on an ideal plane so that one can perceive conflict as a natural part of life. Hannah Höch's *Sperrende Kräfte* (p. 83) plays with contradictions between organic and machine-like forms, between real individuals and their personas, and between middle-class virtues and artistic license. Certainly alienation existed before the twentieth century, but in this painting Höch gives alienation a new meaning and force. She presents herself in the guise of a many-breasted Greek goddess whose hands become struggling thoughts, thoughts that take the form of blossoms attempting to free her from the domination of her lover and mentor Raoul Hausmann, and she presents their child as part toy and part human, a distinct individual and a new creation. Enslaved by her thoughts, Höch is alienated from her lover and cut off from her child.

Painted in 1929, when Germany was suffering from severe economic and political crises, *Sperrende Kräfte* creates a personal image that gives form to this bitter period. And since it is a painting by an artist who once rejected painting—the art of the bourgeoisie—in favor of photomontage, it is a surprising reversal and an acquiescence to the need for tradition and constancy in a world ruled by perpetual change.

A fragment from a particular moment in time, *Sperrende Kräfte* indicates the conflicts between tradition and the future, and in the process it personalizes the dilemma so that one can see how these tensions affected one sensitive person living at a specific time. Höch and Hausmann are symbolic of the painful game life can become, and in particular of the way genuine feelings can seem to be a series of mechanical acts performed by people who are reduced to being somehow less than fully human.

Just as some African masks serve the important function of providing dead ancestors an entry into the world, so Western art reveals aspects of our spiritual world to ourselves. Art is a mask that unveils reality; it is a conduit through which we can feel—if we are willing to take the chance—the way someone else has felt. It is a mask that we wear when we wish truly to understand what it is like to see as another sees.

Although art is always enriching, it is not always uplifting. To see with the eyes of Pollock, Degas, or Höch is to see profoundly, but also to see at times negatively and despondently. The beauty of these artists' work is to be found in their acceptance of humanity and their refusal to gloss over what they perceived as reality. What makes their art beautiful is the truth and perspicacity of their

vision rather than the richness of their colors and the harmony of their compositions. Their art functions as an emotional/intellectual thermometer of their time; it is useful as an instrument of truth, and its beauty depends on its faithfulness to a specific vision. Beauty is not the goal of art. It is only the captivating force that causes one to look, that entices one to understand and to come to terms with truth.

The most telling fragment is a masterwork. "Masterwork" is a more conservative term than "masterpiece." The former emphasizes technique, art as the embodiment of a craft; the latter emphasizes art as an object. Both terms derive from the medieval guild tradition in which a male child was apprenticed to a guild member and learned his craft in that member's workshop. After years of practical experience and increasing responsibility, the apprentice became a journeyman and then a master if he was able to create a "master's work," a piece of such consummate style, grace, and technique that guild members could accept it without question as exemplary of their trade. Since the late fifteenth century, when Leonardo da Vinci raised art to the level of other humanistic studies, "art" has connoted manual dexterity as well as artistic thought.

In this catalogue the traditional term "masterwork" signals an emphasis on outstanding quality and a masterly control of the techniques of making a work of art, including a command of the thought process that ensures a work of art's originality and its pertinence to a particular time.

It also conveys the continuity of quality through time, or more precisely the continuity of significant sensibilities. In its emphasis on masterworks as telling fragments The University of Iowa Museum of Art is more like a Great Books series than an encyclopedia, more an affirmation of quality in thought and technique than a simple grouping of artistic objects. The telling fragments in this Museum's collection contain in embryo the temper of distinct times and places, and they can communicate these felt qualities to people who take the time to look.

The brief essays accompanying the plates in this book are intended to provide a peripatetic view of The University of Iowa Museum of Art. Although the 101 works are grouped first by broad cultural areas, then by medium, and finally alphabetically by the artist's name for easy reference, this catalogue is intended to be savored at will, not read methodically from cover to cover. It is in the nature of an informal tour through the Museum's collection. The essays offer no absolute meanings, let alone theories, but rather suggest possible ways of approaching these particular works of art. They do not grant the artist total control over the work of art, including its meaning; rather they assume that creation involves both the conscious and the unconscious mind, that the work represents an act of faith rather than pure cognition, and that the meaning of imagery may not be consciously understood even by the artist at the outset. Artists create art, but society creates culture. And meaning is a collaborative effort that involves the artist but also involves development over time in a cultural context.

Although a work may allow for all kinds of possible interpretations, it is not a Rosetta Stone ready to be translated. Interpretation is a more creative endeavor than translation; it requires meditation on an artist's act of faith, on the meaning of the dream the artist has dreamed for us. Dreaming is an inventive process, as is the interpretation of dreams. In both endeavors one senses reality: feeling and thought are inextricably aligned. Yet interpretations are more questions than statements, more a plumbing of reality for meaning than an assertion of fact. Interpretation is culture made manifest; it is a significant aspect of the social contract or dialogue that constitutes the meaning of life.