



## Understanding the Inarticulateness of Museum Visitors' Experience of Paintings: A Phenomenological Study of Adult Non-Art Specialists

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### Abstract

*This paper is based on a study of museum visitors' experience of paintings: in particular, the experience of adult non-art specialists. Phenomenology, a form of inquiry that seeks to articulate lived experience, provided the philosophical and methodological framework for the study. Descriptions and themes relating to the experience of paintings were generated from interviews conducted with eight participants. These themes were categorized into two major areas: the articulated aspects and the non-articulated aspects. The former refers to aspects that people can articulate when they describe their experience. For example, they talk about the formal qualities of paintings, related textual information, and the museum environment. The latter refers to aspects that people cannot articulate. For example, they have difficulty in expressing their feelings, their relationship with time, and an understanding of the role of the body. This paper focuses on the aspects that museum visitors cannot articulate when they describe their experience. This inarticulateness provides insights into certain overlooked features of the experience: the embodied nature of the experience, the way time is experienced, and the viewer's feelings about paintings. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of the study for art educators. It is suggested that teachers should prepare students in ways that will enable them to make use of their various cognitive, social and cultural frameworks in experiencing works of art.*

### Introduction

Having been a teacher of art for more than twenty years and being currently involved in the preparation of school art teachers, I am deeply interested in the ways in which museum visitors look at paintings. Some walk hastily through a museum, stopping in front of a painting for less than a minute, while others shuffle from one painting to another and pause at every one they come across. Some visitors walk very close to a painting; they read every line of the caption, look at the painting again and then look back at the caption. Some people appear to look without a particular orientation and simply glance all over the gallery, but others seem to know exactly what they

want to see and go straight to a specific work. Some will make notes or sketches while they look, but many more just gaze solemnly and silently. But what exactly happens to museum visitors' minds, as well as to their bodies, when they are looking at paintings? What do they see, think and feel? Are such experiences "aesthetic experience", a term commonly found in art textbooks and used by philosophers, art educators as well as the media? What is it like for people who have no specialist training in art to experience paintings in a museum? What does such an experience mean to these people? In response to these questions, I developed and conducted a study which focused particularly on the experience of museum visitors who do not know much about art

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history or art theories, for most of my students and their students belong to this category.

### **Research Focus and Rationale: The Experience of Non-Art Specialists**

To many philosophers of the analytic tradition and their heirs, especially to theorists of modernism, museum visitors' experience of paintings is an "aesthetic experience". They believe that aesthetic experience is a distinctive kind of experience in which people engage in a disinterested contemplation of the visual or aesthetic qualities of paintings. However, this use of the term "aesthetic experience" to describe the experience of art is too limiting, as Noël Carroll (2001) points out:

Different artworks ask for or mandate or prescribe many different kinds of responses, whose appropriateness is best assessed on a case-by-case basis. To attempt to call them aesthetic experiences or to reserve that label for only the best of them simply courts confusion and even, unfortunately, rancour. (p. 61)

The meaning of the term "aesthetic experience" has been complicated by a variety of "prejudices", "resistances", "suspicion", and "connotations" (Maclagan, 2001, p. 9). In this study, I elected to use the term "museum visitors' experience of paintings" (or "the experience of paintings"), for the sake of its clarity and its independence of the many established preconceptions. The scope of the study was limited to museum visitors' experiences associated with paintings – the art form that most people talked about when I began interviewing them about their experiences in a museum. The term "museums" is used here to refer to art museums and galleries, with most of their collections and exhibitions devoted to visual art objects.

Previous scholarship and research into the experience of art has focused on the portrayal of "successful" experience or what Abigail Housen (2001, p. 2) called "expert viewing": that is, on the experiences of people trained in art-related disciplines. These experiences are characterized by total absorption, heightened feeling and great joy (see, for instance, Abbs, 1994; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Funch, 1997). The implication is that only the experiences of expert viewers are legitimate, and these experiences become the goals which we try to attain. However, I argue that it is important to understand how non-specialists – that is, people with an "ordinary" artistic background – experience paintings. After all, they greatly outnumber people with expert artistic

knowledge, and it should be of interest to art educators and museum educators to understand their experiences. Some empirical studies have focused on particular aspects of the experience, such as emotions and feelings (e.g. Linko, 2003), aesthetic development (e.g. Housen, 2001), cognition (e.g. Leinhardt, Tittle & Knutson, 2002), the kinds of satisfaction derived from the experience (e.g. Pekarik, Doering & Karns, 1999) and visitors' interpretive strategies (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill & Moussouri, 2001). However, none of these studies addresses the problem from a phenomenological perspective. Before going on to examine the experience of the participants in my study, I explain the phenomenological method that was employed.

### **Philosophical and Methodological Frameworks: Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, emphasizing the lived meaning of embodied experience, was the methodology used for the study. It was chosen for its ability to capture the immediacy and subjectivity of experience. Phenomenology, and in particular hermeneutic phenomenology, does not claim to provide universal explanations. It is more concerned with the search for understanding, meaning, contextualization, and interpretation. The validity of a phenomenological study lies in its capacity to generate sympathetic thought or agreement from readers, as well as in its rigour and in the appropriateness of the procedures used to collect and analyse data (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997).

Unlike the Cartesian view that the mind is independent of the body and the external world, the basic tenet of phenomenology is that mind and body co-constitute each other as an inseparable unity. Understood phenomenologically, mind and body are one, and "human beings both have a body and are a body" (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997, p. 5). It would be wrong to view the body as a 'thing' and attempt to understand it as an object. "Bodies are thoughtful bodies just as minds are embodied minds" (Becker, 1992, p. 16). Therefore, the methodology approaches human experience as a total experience involving the viewer's mind and body, affective and cognitive faculties, and feeling and understanding, with an emphasis on the reciprocity of various elements. The emphasis on the situatedness of human experience is also helpful in enabling an understanding of the connection between museum visitors' experience and their other lived experiences. The methodology is sensitive to the context of the experience, taking into consideration the viewer's personal contribution and orientation in the encounter.

## The Participants and the Interviews

In order to obtain accounts of people's lived experience of paintings, I looked for individuals who had had such an experience. Although I do not belong to the category of non-art specialists, my own experiences, as well as first-person accounts of museum visitors' experience found in published texts, were used to initiate the study. As noted by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), the phenomenological approach involves "a close examination of people's words, actions, and documents in order to discern patterns of meaning which come out of this data" (p. 16). Van Manen (1997) also suggests looking for documentation of lived experience from "a multitude of expressions or forms" (p. 92). Therefore, this study also collected, used and analysed experiential accounts drawn from poems, novels, diaries and research related to the experience being studied.

A major part of the data collection focused on the experiences of eight adult non-art specialists (referred to as participants hereafter) who visit museums on a regular basis, ranging from twice a year to once a month. Five women and three men, ranging in age from the early twenties to middle forties, were selected as participants for the study. Their educational backgrounds ranged from secondary education to PhD studies. Most of them had studied art until junior secondary school (age fifteen). The participants' past and current occupations had no direct relation to art or art-related disciplines. Their family backgrounds did not seem to make any significant impact on their interest in paintings and museums. They are regular museum-goers and they like to talk about their experiences in museums. I invited them to participate because they (1) had numerous experiences of paintings in a museum; (2) were able to talk and provide detailed descriptions of their experiences; (3) were willing to participate in the research and be involved in lengthy interviews; and (4) were interested in understanding the nature and meaning of their experiences.

Potential participants were approached and briefed about the background of the research and the nature of their involvement. They understood that they would be interviewed once or twice and that each interview would last from one to two hours. They also knew that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed and that the data collected might be used for publication. Each participant signed a consent form, stating that participation in the study was voluntary, that participants might choose to withdraw from the study at any time, and that they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

## The First Interviews

The first interviews with the participants took place in a variety of locations, but were usually conducted in cafés or restaurants close to the participants' offices or places of study. Each participant was interviewed separately. As I did not know most of the participants well before the interviews, I usually started by offering a brief explanation of the study and asking them to talk about their families and educational backgrounds. Participants also talked about the museums which they usually visited and their interest in paintings and museums. The first part of the interview was a conversation to gain an understanding of the participant and to establish mutual trust and confidence. After the first conversation, participants soon got used to being audio-recorded. During these interviews, participants were invited to:

1. reflect on their previous experiences with paintings in any context;
2. share instances that stood out from these experiences, in particular those in a museum setting; and
3. talk about how these experiences related to them personally.

In general, the first interview took longer than the second interview, as some of the time was devoted to the introduction of the participants themselves. Participants also had an abundance of previous experiences of paintings to share. The first interview usually lasted for an hour and a half to two hours. Usually the interviews came to an end when the participants said that they had no more experiences to share. In general, the experiences described in the first interviews were 'memorable' experiences of paintings in a museum. The participants talked mainly about experiences in international museums visited when they had travelled abroad. Both 'good' and 'bad' experiences were mentioned. Sometimes, participants could not remember details about the paintings they had seen. For example, they had forgotten the title of the painting or even the subject matter, but they remembered certain qualities of the painting, such as its use of colours, or particular aspects of the experience, such as the feeling of being inside the painting. As participants recalled their past experiences, they portrayed these in a more condensed and focused manner than in the second interviews.

## The Second Interviews

After the first interview, a visit to the Hong Kong Museum of Art or another art museum was then scheduled, and interviews took place immediately

after the visit. The time between the first and second interviews was two weeks to a month. This was dependent on the availability of the participants as well as on my having developed themes generated from the first interview. Before we sat down for the second interview, the participants were encouraged to walk around the museum on their own. They knew that they would be talking about some of the paintings they had seen in the museum. As is typical of phenomenological research, the interviews followed the flow of the conversation, rather than being organized around specific pre-determined questions.

During the second interview, I also discussed with the participants some of the themes that had emerged from the first interview. Sometimes I asked them to elaborate on specific issues and sometimes I sought clarification of certain themes. The second interview usually lasted for an hour. The participants talked about their experiences in a more fluid and spontaneous way. Besides having a better knowledge of me and the research, the participants knew what the interview would be like and anticipated what they were going to talk about. They were able to describe the paintings in more detail. During the second interview, themes or topics which had emerged from the first interview appeared again, but were now embellished with examples and references to the paintings.

Interviews were transcribed, and subsequently descriptions of the participants' experiences were constructed and common themes underlying each experience were developed. When working on these descriptions and themes, I employed specific phenomenological perspectives developed by Max van Manen (1997), as well as referring to the existing literature to interpret participants' experiences. In the following sections, I show how the study contributes to an understanding of the experience as a whole, and discuss the implications for art education in particular.

### Results of the Study: Inarticulate Feeling, Time and Body

Phenomenologists look for presence and absence, parts and wholes, and particulars and generals in a phenomenon. In this vein, I believe that something unsaid is as important as something said. I therefore looked not only at what the participants were able to articulate in describing their experience of paintings, but also at what they were unable to articulate. This is relevant in the practice of painting as well: what is painted and what is not painted may be equally important. In traditional Chinese paintings, what is not painted, or the 'blank' area, assumes "significance

beyond the painted scene" (Guo<sup>1</sup> in Li, 1981/1988, p. 216). Such blank areas communicate something that cannot be communicated through visual forms and allow the viewer tremendous possibilities in personal interpretation. Jean Grondin (1998), in discussing Hans-Georg Gadamer's ideas of art and the experience of art, also notes that:

When confronted with a work of art, something strikes us, invites us to rethink, rediscover our experience, yet we cannot translate its "proposition" in another language. (p. 270)

For most of the time during the interviews, the participants were able to respond using gestures and eye contact, to express themselves verbally and reflect on their experience. However, phrases like "it's difficult to tell", "how to say it?", "I don't know how to describe it", "no, no ... it's difficult to say it exactly" occasionally emerged. At other times, silences or pauses occurred when they talked about certain aspects of their experience. These sporadic points of inarticulateness or inexpressiveness interested me. In my own experience, this was quite different from what happens when engaging people in talking about a film or a book. Then they are usually more fluent and straightforward. I am not the first to detect such inarticulateness in describing the experience of works of art. Sutton (2003), Maclagan (2001), Funch (1997), Abbs (1994), Wertz-Fairchild (1991) and Moncrieff (1989) have all made the same observation. In this paper, I will discuss the non-articulated aspects of the experience by focusing on two questions: What does it mean when museum visitors experience a certain kind of inarticulateness when they talk about their experience of paintings? In what ways does such inarticulateness help us better understand the experience?

#### 1. *We have difficulty describing our feelings*

A recurring theme that appeared during most of the interviews was that participants had difficulties in fully expressing their feelings.

#### *We do not know how to describe our feelings*

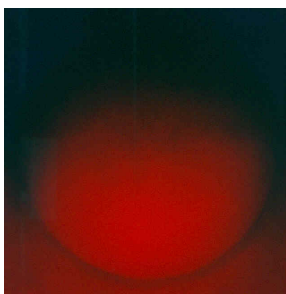
Some participants said that they had certain feelings but they did not know how to describe them. They

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<sup>1</sup> Born during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 A.D.), Guo Xi (c.1020 – c.1090) was a court official as well as a renowned painter who specialized in landscape painting. He was the author of the book *Linquan Gaozhi (Lofty Record of Forests and Streams)*, a collection of Guo's views on the techniques and purposes of Chinese landscape paintings.

searched for and found some words, but it seemed that there was still a certain quality of the feeling not yet articulated. For example, one of the participants, Yoko<sup>2</sup>, talking about the painting *Let Me Be* [Figure 1], was not able to pin down her feeling exactly:

I have a lot of questions in mind. The feeling is immediate but it's difficult to tell exactly what it is. How to say it? I feel peaceful, comfortable, warm, smooth ... I really feel this way.



**Figure 1**  
*Let Me Be*, 1971  
Han Zhixun (1922- )  
Acrylic on canvas  
Hong Kong Museum of Art

Another participant, Ken, was simply not clear about his feeling:

I don't know how to describe the way I feel. The sphere is composed of many layers and it makes me think of plants like onion and lettuce. Considering the title of the painting [*Break Through I*] [Figure 2], I think that it has successfully created the feeling of "breaking through".



**Figure 2**  
*Break Through I*  
Zhou Luyun (1924- )  
Ink and colour on paper  
135 cm x 65.5 cm  
Hong Kong Museum of Art

<sup>2</sup> Participants in the study have been given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality

Judging from the experience of Yoko and Ken, there seems to be something that is beyond the capacity of language to express or to capture.

***We have difficulty describing what it is like to experience paintings***

Sometimes participants used terms like "resonance", "unifying", "have a life of its own" or "enrich", which are abstract and open to interpretation; they were not able to articulate fully what they meant. When they were asked to say something more about it, they just repeated the same thing or went back to describing the painting again. It seems that they had an intuitive understanding of these terms or phrases but did not know how to elaborate on their meanings. The following are two extracts from interviews with a participant, Connie, when she talked about Van Gogh's paintings in general:

Yes ... *a sense of unifying*. But it is difficult to explain. ... . His works are different from classical paintings that show everything three-dimensionally, with great detail, and produce a photo-realistic effect. Van Gogh does not paint in this way. ... At first sight, it is obvious that it is a painting. But within the painting, I sense something more than a painting. It's this quality that stands out from the experience of paintings. This quality is what I call *the power of life*.

Even to a layperson like me, Van Gogh's paintings can show his passion and I can feel it. The emotions of the artist draw me into *a stage of resonance*. Even if it's a clump of grass, you can feel that the grass is alive. ... I think ... let me think ... I think resonance means ... [laugh] it is very difficult to make it clear. Anyway, it is like ... perhaps we use the term very often, but indeed we ...

In the above extracts, Connie mentions having "a sense of unifying" and entering "a stage of resonance". However, when using these phrases, she insisted that she was a layperson and therefore presumably had no special knowledge of what they meant.

***We do not understand how and why feelings are created when we look at paintings***

Although participants were not asked to explain why they had a certain feeling or how they came to have an association, they tried to give reasons or justifications. However, on some occasions, they had difficulty offering an explanation. For example, Irene,

another participant in the study, could not understand why she experienced a sense of the spiritual when she saw Cézanne's painting *L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny*:

For the spiritual, it could be ... it's very strong and spiritual and philosophical. It's very different from seeing other Western paintings. [pause] I think spiritual ... I don't know why ... I don't exactly know why I feel this way.

Yoko did not understand how paintings and poems worked to convey feelings:

I think it's the images of people described in poems or paintings that matter. Perhaps it is their shapes and forms. No, it's difficult to tell. I don't know how to say it. Sometimes a few words or a few images can be very powerful.

Yoko also had difficulties explaining how she came to feel what she felt. She wanted to explain or justify her feelings but she could not:

... the earthy colour makes the painting [*The Homeless*] [Figure 3] look miserable. I don't know how to describe the ways in which these colours create a miserable atmosphere. I don't know how I get this feeling.



**Figure 3**  
*The Homeless*, 1987  
Zhu Xinghua (1935- )  
Ink and colour on paper  
163 cm x 95 cm  
Hong Kong Museum of Art

In the situations referred to above, the participants had unanswered questions. These questions focused mainly on feelings that arose when they were directly in front of the painting. The participants sometimes could not see a connection between what they saw and what they felt.

### *Discussion and reflections*

I suggest that there are three possible ways of accounting for the participants' inarticulateness when trying to describe their feelings. The first is that the feelings they had while experiencing the paintings were not clear to the participants. Perhaps the feeling was too mixed, too vague or too complicated. The second is that the participant was clear about how he or she felt but was unable to put it into words. This is different from the first case in that it implies that a certain inexpressible quality about the feeling or an inadequacy of language made it impossible for the feeling to be clearly articulated. The third possibility is that participants were responding to certain established beliefs (for example, those contained in modernist and expressionist theory) about feelings and paintings that they had picked up piecemeal.

During normal museum visits, people do not talk about their experience. They just walk and look. It was only in the situation of being interviewed that the participants began to think back, and somehow they wanted to talk about their feelings about the paintings. In our natural pre-reflective state of being, we seldom notice ourselves along with the object of our consciousness. It was therefore easier for the participants to describe what they saw – the paintings, the museum environment or the people around them – than what they felt. It seems that this inarticulateness in describing an experience of paintings reflects the nature of the experience: a bodily involvement with paintings with no consciousness of such involvement. Such bodily involvement can be seen in Connie's mentioning of "unifying" and "resonance". The word "resonance" is derived from the Latin word *resonantia*, which means "echo" (Barnhart, 1995, p. 657), a hearing of one's own voice.

Museum visitors' difficulties in describing their feelings may be related to the nature of reflection or recollection. Human experience is a constant flow, with one experience following another. We may recollect experience, but we cannot have an experience in exactly the same way as we had it in the past, for our current experience always takes previous experiences into account. Any account of experience captures only part of the total sum of the experience. Therefore, people's reflections on their experiences are "not introspective but retrospective" in nature, and are not the entirety, but merely instances, of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1997, p. 10). There will be a loss of detail in such a retrospective activity. Phenomenologists never deny that a recollection of experience is inevitably a "lesser" version of the actual lived experience, in the sense that we can never recount all the details of an experience during the act of recollection. However, a recollection is also an

“expanded” version of the lived experience, since it takes into account the meanings of the experience accumulated over time.

When we are asked to recount our experience of paintings in a museum verbally, we are in a way navigating between words and images. Words and images are two sets of symbols that we use to represent ourselves and the world surrounding us. Although they share many similar aspects and there are many occasions on which one may be substituted for the other, there is still a certain mystery about how words and images interact with each other. Comparing the relation between words and images to a dialectical trope, W. J. Mitchell (1996, p. 50) suggests that it is “a relay between semiotic, aesthetic, and social differences” and is “subject to finite variation, historical transformation and geographical dislocation”. It is still unclear how words become lost when images are being discussed, but it is certainly the case that vision, images or visual experiences are not easily reducible to words or language. The inexpressibility of a feeling, which is often a feature of an experience of paintings in a museum, may result from the gap between words and pictures that Mitchell speaks of.

Another possible explanation for the inexpressibility of the feelings of the participants may be that the participants held the belief that paintings must create feelings – an expectation commonly found among members of the general public regarding the nature and experience of paintings. The participants therefore expected certain feelings to arise when they saw the paintings in the museum, but actually responded in ways other than emotionally. Therefore, when asked about what or how they felt, they had difficulty in describing it.

## 2. We forget time

The participants in this study seldom spoke of time when they talked about their experience. When they were asked about their experience of time, they had difficulty describing it. Talking about the painting *The Homeless* [Figure 3], Yoko did not know

... how long I have looked at the painting. The environment is quiet, as this painting is not an arresting one and therefore only very few people are around. ... I cannot tell how long I have been standing in front of this painting. Certainly it is longer than when seeing other paintings. I am not conscious of the time, therefore I cannot tell how long it takes.

Another participant, Mandy, did not know how much time she had spent

... standing in front of the painting [*They're Growing Up*] [Figure 4], but it does not last long. Then I continue to walk through the whole gallery and come back to the painting later.



Figure 4  
*They're Growing up*,  
1996  
Deng Ningzi  
Mixed media on  
canvas  
159 cm x 206.5 cm  
Hong Kong Museum  
of Art

Ken also did not notice the passage of time and he thought that

there should be plenty of time for me to walk around the gallery and I plan to have a short rest before joining our classmates. However, I am late. When I finish walking, my classmates are already there waiting for me. I am not conscious of the passage of time as I am walking around.

Evident in all three of the cases quoted above is that, in a museum, “time seems to slow as perception sharpens” (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005, p. 65). The participants’ sense of temporality had vanished. Usually, when we experience something pleasant or something that we enjoy, “time flies”. Does this then mean that museum visitors’ experience of paintings is necessarily pleasant or enjoyable? Judging from the descriptions of Yoko, Mandy and Ken, museum visitors’ experience of paintings would be more aptly described as meaningful than as pleasant or enjoyable. In the case of Yoko, she felt sad or even disturbed about the homeless people depicted in the painting. For Mandy, her experience of *They're Growing Up* brought back childhood memories and reflections on her past and future life. Ken admired the technical capabilities of the painter and wanted to learn from the painting. So perhaps the dimension of time vanishes when museum visitors are absorbed in what they see – when what they see is meaningful, but not necessarily pleasant. Time is experienced when we are conscious of it. The participants’

inarticulateness or lack of comments about time may be seen as another reflection of the nature of the experience. The participants were completely absorbed and did not have a sense of how time was passing.

Time has an ongoing dynamic and is experienced in an “unexperienced” manner. “If no one asks me what time is, I know; if I am asked, I do not know” (Macann, 1993, p. 197-198). Therefore, when participants talked about objective time or the time that they spent on a painting, they became inarticulate. From another perspective, the participants’ unawareness of clock time may be interpreted as an indication that they were involved in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) called “reflective time” instead of “objective time”. According to Martin Heidegger (1927/1976), reflective time is understood as time linked explicitly to the experiencing person and cannot be analysed in isolation from that person. Participants engaged in numerous reflections during their experience of paintings in a museum. Such reflections took the form of both images and words, and ranged from thoughts about personal life to reflections on social issues, and from recollections of childhood events to recent memories. The viewer may thus be seen not as an individual experiencing time, but as a subject constituting time, during such an experience.

### 3. *We forget our body*

In their experiential accounts, the participants mentioned paintings, reproductions, feelings, images, words, people and the museum environment. However, what lies hidden behind the experience of things, objects or people is the body. What is a body? “The body is a centre, a point of view on which I cannot take up a point of view” (Macann, 1993, p. 173). Therefore, we often forget that we experience with our body. A body is not only the physical substance that composes our external physicality; it is the body or I who feels, touches, sees, relates and thinks. Perhaps it is the structure of language as well as the structure of the experience that keeps the body hidden or inarticulate. This apparent “absence” of the body seems to allow the object to become present. In museum visitors’ experience of paintings, therefore, the inarticulateness of the body allows other aspects of the experience to be articulated.

I find it particularly useful to understand the inarticulate body in museum visitors’ experience of paintings in terms of the “tacit knowing” and “bodily indwelling” suggested by Michael Polanyi (1958). Polanyi, who began as a scientist and later became a philosopher, talked about inarticulate intelligence and

tacit knowing in his book *Personal Knowledge* (1958). In *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), Polanyi claims that “we can know more than we can tell” (p. 4). Polanyi (1958) identifies two kinds of awareness in knowing: “subsidiary awareness and focal awareness” (p. 58). Take reading as an example: when we are reading printed words in English, we are aware of the meaning of the sentences, and such awareness is basically built on our awareness that the words are written in English, following specific sentence structures and grammatical rules (Gill, 2000). This awareness of the meaning of the sentences is focal awareness. That is something explicit, something that we can describe. The awareness of the grammatical rules and of the fact that the language is English is subsidiary awareness. This is something tacit, something that we usually cannot describe. Therefore, we rely on some things that we are not aware of in order to focus on others that we are aware of. As summarized by Polanyi (1966), “we attend from something for attending to something else” (p. 10). From this observation, Polanyi differentiates two types of knowing: tacit knowing and explicit knowing. Tacit knowing has more to do with subsidiary awareness and bodily activity, while explicit knowing has more to do with focal awareness and conceptual activity (Gill, 2000).

Another concept proposed by Polanyi is that of “indwelling”, an idea closely related to the phenomenological perspective of lived body or embodiment. To Polanyi, the tacit dimension of knowing can only be achieved by our “indwelling” in the subsidiary. Using the reading example again, “indwelling” means that we are using or practising English in a way that we are unaware of. With regard to the experience of paintings, “indwelling” may be understood as “wandering about” in paintings or as the “imaginative inhabitation” of paintings, two terms proposed by Maclagan (2001) in his discussion of people’s experience of paintings (p. 36). “By means of our embodiment, we come to live in or ‘indwell’ the things and ideas, people and institutions, that make up the natural and social worlds that surround us” (Gill, 2000, pp. 39-40). By dwelling in the particular or the subsidiary, the body interacts with the surrounding physical and social environment in which tacit knowledge is created. Bodily indwelling is a way in which we engage in tacit knowing.

Polanyi’s view on tacit knowing provides insights which help us to interpret the inarticulateness of people talking about their experience of paintings in a museum. The tacit mode of knowing is a kind of immersion in the context of the knowing situation, involving the knower’s senses, knowledge, body, experiences, and various cognitive, social and cultural



frameworks. It is by dwelling in such bodily and communal realities that we come to know. While we are engaging in the tacit mode of knowing in order to focus on explicit knowledge, we can never articulate the tacit factors. By the same token, the body remains an inarticulate or non-verbal aspect of an experience of paintings in a museum. Therefore, in Polanyi's terms, we use or rely on our body (which is subsidiary awareness) to attend to a painting (which is focal awareness). Normally, we can articulate what we see (the painting) but forget how we see (our body), since it is one integrated act. In this sense, the body is actually a perceiving device.

### Thoughts for Teachers: Reawakening the Body in an Experience of Paintings

The insights described above have a number of implications for the teaching of art, and in particular for how teachers might help their students to benefit as much as possible from looking at paintings in museums. I argue that the experience of paintings in a museum is an embodied experience. How can teachers help students to have such experience intelligently? How can teachers enable students to dwell in a painting? Perhaps it is impossible for teachers to do this, or even if they make the attempt, they can never be sure whether they have been successful. What teachers can do is to prepare students in ways conducive to enabling them to make use of their various cognitive, social and cultural frameworks in experiencing a painting. For example, teachers can provide opportunities for students to become familiar with the museum environment when they are young, to see paintings and visit museums on a regular basis and to talk about their experiences of paintings and the museum in daily life, and in particular during art lessons. We may refer to these pedagogic activities as the "interiorizing" of the knowledge or experience students may make use of when they encounter a painting in the future (Polanyi, 1958, p. 24). It is not a kind of training or learning that seeks immediate effects, but is rather groundwork that may enable students later to become meaningfully engaged with paintings in a museum. Making students explicitly aware of the bodily dimension of the experience is not particularly desirable. Students will experience paintings through their bodies, regardless of whether or not they are aware of doing so.

Teachers should understand that museum visits and the experience of paintings may not make an observable impact on students' learning of art, especially on a short-term basis. But that students cannot vividly describe their experience of art works in a museum does not necessarily mean that they gain

nothing from the visit. Some of the knowledge gained is tacit rather than explicit. The experience of paintings in a museum may or may not result in a better understanding of art history, art theories or art-making. However, the experience itself can be meaningful to the individual. Having a personally meaningful experience may then inspire museum visitors to learn more about art history, art theories or art-making.

Having a certain kind of feeling evoked by a painting seems to be a prominent feature of experiencing paintings in a museum. However, it may be misleading for teachers to ask "What do you feel?" immediately after their students have looked at a painting, since this presupposes that the function of a painting is to make the viewer feel something. Asking students to describe what they feel reflects the long-held belief that paintings make people feel, but there are times when people do not respond in this way. Rather than posing a vague and general question such as "What do you feel?" at the very beginning of the museum visit, perhaps the teacher may reframe the question thus: "Does the painting remind you of anything, any places or any person that you have a personal feeling about?" I suggest that it is important to allow students, and in particular students at senior secondary level and college students, to learn to understand why people respond to paintings predominantly with emotions and feelings. A first step in this direction could be, for example, for a teacher to initiate a student project investigating the history, concepts and beliefs of the expressionist and modernist theories. Moreover, students should be encouraged not to see paintings solely as expressions of artists' emotions and feelings, but to explore paintings from perspectives other than the aesthetic. The emphasis in school curricula on the learning of forms and visual elements should be balanced by discussions on how paintings can be viewed from other perspectives, such as the historical, social or cultural.

### Conclusion

Museum visitors' experience of paintings, like all other human experiences, possesses certain features. The normal un-reflective speech environment renders it difficult to express certain aspects of the experience: for example, the embodiment of the viewer, the way in which time is experienced, and the viewer's feeling. As I have discussed in this paper on the non-articulated aspects of the experience, the regaining or recovering of the body is typical. Gadamer has rightly pointed out that "the power of the work of art suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him

back to the whole of his existence” (1965/2004, pp. 60-61) and “every encounter with it [a work of art] [is] an encounter of ourselves” (1970/1976, p. 95).

After all, museum visitors’ experience of paintings is not a spectator, but a bodily, event.

### About the Author



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