

Why do people go to museums? What convinces them to spend perfectly lovely afternoons wandering down corridors, looking at old stuff? What is the fascination for relics that belonged to people from other times, usually from places far away? Some viewers are forced there to complete school assignments. Others feel a little “culture” may rub off on them from just being in the place. Many wander amiably through, wishing they could see what others or “insiders” see, or wondering how to read the messages the artworks contain. Most people are aware that something very special is there in the museum’s paintings and sculptures. Indeed it is, for museums and galleries allow us to reach beyond ourselves, to feel the connection to countless others who have gone before us, who experienced the same feelings, encountered similar revelations, endeavored to know their place and purpose, and struggled to express themselves through the visual arts. The art objects within the museums are the messages left behind, the makers’ dialogues with the people of their time. The artworks are their expressions that said “I am,” and have now become the bold statement, “I was.” We often experience that dialogue, some of us more strongly than others. Even the visitor who sarcastically asks, “What’s THAT?” has begun the conversation, has been hooked into the quest, and has begun the journey into something profound. Whether or not the questioner goes beyond that point determines how rewarding the quest will be. For your visit to a museum to be fully rewarding, it’s helpful to learn about art styles, artists, and art works. A very important way to practice is to visit a major gallery or museum. Why is this always part of an art history course? What will you get out of it? First, you’ll be placed in the physical presence of works of art. If you’re interested in, or have been studying about paintings for example, how helpful it is to see the actual colors in a painting, and be able to trace the brushstrokes created by the artist’s hand movements. So when you hear or read descriptions of “feathery” or “bold” brushstrokes, you’ll have a greater understanding of what that means. Let’s also remember that classroom slides or reproductions of artworks in books often vary grossly from the original artworks. As slides age their colors fade, or they may have been incorrectly processed in the first place. How images are processed and reproduced in print or on computer screens similarly affects their colors and details. It’s also exciting to think that as you stand before a work of art you see it exactly as the artist did when he or she was creating it! Reproducing sculpture creates yet another set of problems. Seeing sculpture on a flat page or on a flat screen is vastly different from seeing the real thing because you’re missing its most important aspect—you can’t see its three-dimensional qualities. It has been observed that students have been unable to identify actual sculptures because of having seen only textbook reproductions or slide representations during their studies. Viewing sculptures in a museum or gallery is your chance to walk around it or move side to side and see how the object looks from different views. These are perspectives a slide, computer screen or textbook illustration can’t give you. Ask yourself about the scale of the sculpture—does it loom over you? Does it encourage you to seek other views? Does it invite you into it? Does it move? Does it make a sound? Another important experience when visiting a gallery or museum is that you’ll see more than one or two artworks at a time. That’s why the similarities within an art style, and the variations of individual artists within that style will be much more evident because they’ll be seen with each other. What better way to understand a style than to be surrounded by it as you would be in the Impressionist or Native American, or Egyptian, or Pre-Columbian art wings? Being surrounded by a

multitude of works from a given style or period makes the subtle variations much more noticeable. Remember that the pictures you see in books or the images you see in a classroom are usually the major works of an artist, style or culture. Many of these art objects are in the collections of the finest, oldest museums of the world. The important sculpture of the Roman emperor Augustus, for instance, is in Rome. Many of the great examples of Egyptian art are in the Cairo museum. It is rare that you will find a lot of the greatest pieces of ancient art in your neighborhood museum. So how can you expect to recognize the lesser-known examples you may see in local collections? By visiting a museum or gallery you will be starting to recognize and apply some basic ways to understand art. You'll begin to see some recurring details that define a particular art style. You'll begin to get a feel for what a particular culture or time period considered important and valuable. Finally, galleries and museums also offer chances to meet artists or get sneak peeks at newly installed exhibitions. Check the newspaper for the dates and times of art openings. At gallery preview events you may meet the artist and learn more about his or her ideas and techniques. You can socialize with other visitors and hear their insights. Openings are usually gala events, complete with snacks and beverages! Look for art events in your area, like art walks, artists' studio visits, or art festivals. And this leads to one last reason to go to a gallery or museum --to enjoy yourself! Have fun visiting the museum café. Interact with other museum-goers and share your experiences. Tempt yourself in the bookstore. Getting comfortable around works of art will offer you many years of enjoyment, and when you're looking for a relaxing, pleasant break from everyday routine, why not go to a gallery or museum?