



BECOMING BEHOLDERS

*Cultivating
Sacramental Imagination
and Actions in
College Classrooms*

EDITED BY

Karen E. Eifler and
Thomas M. Landy

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Practice Makes Reception: The Role of Contemplative Ritual in Approaching Art¹

Joanna E. Ziegler

In the midst of a demanding and often exhausting personal and professional life, I have one hope for my work: that teaching the practice of looking at art should have a central place in the creation of a meaningful spiritual life in the Catholic academy. It trains the beholder—indeed the emphasis is on the beholder—by its discipline and daily routine and by its continual and repetitive confrontation with a work of art, to be ready to “see” in the fullest way. It teaches humility by training students to be open to the work of art on its own terms, rather than approaching it as a mirror of their own will and desires; it teaches them to pay attention, not just as a cerebral activity, but as one that involves the entire body and senses. It teaches an approach to what Esther de Waal calls “mindfulness, an awareness,” which turns the process “from a cerebral activity into a living response.”² The practice of looking, as I propose to teach it, comes very close to introducing students to a form of contemplative practice, such as those identified with the great spiritual and mystical traditions of Christianity and Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism.³

¹ This essay first appeared in *As Leaven in the World: Essays on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001).

² Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of Saint Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), 43.

³ Two institutions have helped to encourage these ideas: Collegium and the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. The visits with the participating fellows changed my thinking about contemplation and its importance to education. I cannot thank

It is fitting to begin with a quotation from de Waal's splendid book on Benedictine spirituality, *Seeking God: The Way of Saint Benedict*.⁴ She shows us how to find the Benedictine spirit in the contemporary world of housewives, academics, and office workers, people like ourselves, by teaching us how to live that spirit in our daily lives. The theory of Benedictine spirituality does not, indeed cannot, as de Waal insists, exist apart from how one is actually to live a Christian life: "I have one hope in writing this book and that is that it may serve as a first step to an encounter with the Benedictine way, for reading about it is no substitute for living it."⁵ Although this is not an essay about Benedictine spirituality, I urge the reader to consider precisely this point: that the pursuit of a meaningful spiritual life is not the result of amassing erudition and theory but of learning how one is to lead that life in a routine daily way. Art gives us one way to learn to do this. In chapter 3, de Waal offers a good place from which to begin our own exploration. Although she talks about "listening," let us include—in our mind and for our purposes—the word "seeing":

The very first word of the Rule is "listen." From the start the disciple's goal is to hear keenly and sensitively that Word of God which is not only message but event and encounter. . . . To listen closely, with every fibre of our being, at every moment of the day, is one of the most difficult things in the world, and yet it is essential if we mean to find the God whom we are seeking. If we stop listening to what we find hard to take then, as the Abbot of St Benoit-sur-Loire puts it in a striking phrase, "We're likely to pass God by without even noticing Him."⁶

This essay explores the ways in which viewing art—the practice, the very act itself, of viewing works of art—can be profoundly spiritual. I would call us away from thinking about art in the usual ways, as something to do for mere recreation or entertainment, in our leisure or spare time. Of course looking at art is entertaining. We like to visit museums

sufficiently Tom Landy for getting me "on my way" by accepting me to attend Collegium in 1996 and the Center, along with the Nathan Cummings Foundation, for supporting the development with Joe Lawrence (Department of Philosophy, College of the Holy Cross) of a course on this material in 1998.

⁴ De Waal, *Seeking God*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁶ De Waal, *Seeking God*, 42–43.

during vacations and attend concerts and plays in order to relax, to escape from the demands of our overly pressured lives. On the other hand, when the religious purpose of art is raised, immediately we think of art with a religious subject matter. The history of art, especially from the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods, is rich with paintings and sculptures of biblical narratives of Mary and Jesus, saints, martyrs, popes, and sinners—the redeemers and the redeemed.

Catholics therefore presume that for their art to be spiritually enriching, it must be religious art about the figures, symbols, and stories of Christianity. This essay proposes, however, that there is another role for art, one that is neither entertaining nor didactic in the ways we have come to presume: beholding art is a practiced discipline and, as such, teaches us to see closely, “with every fibre of our being,” as de Waal would have it. This goal—to see “keenly and sensitively”—is essential if we are to be ready for an encounter with things as they are rather than as we would have them. With daily practice, what really looking at art gives us—openness to whatever and however one defines “the transcendent,” either as God or “the other”—becomes something more than a scholarly exercise in rhetoric; it becomes attainable in actuality.

The discipline of art history, at least at this moment, has little to offer the person intent upon probing the deeper truths that art might have to offer, for it is more interested in social and political issues than philosophical or spiritual ones. This is not to say that there are no resources in the history of the discipline, but they are fragmentary, isolated cases of scholars here and there trying to introduce a personally meaningful element into writing about art.⁷ Since the nineteenth century, art history has been concerned with developing a “scientific” approach, in the early modern academic sense of the word, which would ensure a place within the established hierarchy of disciplines in the academy. The earliest practitioners of art history were dedicated, therefore, to developing methods with a claim to objectivity through fact gathering and dependable documentary study. My goal is to promote an enlightened experience of art, too, but by using less objectifying means than current academic practice sanctions. My emphasis first is on today’s viewers,

⁷ I am relying in this paragraph on the work of Kathryn Brush, who has been researching the formative years of art history. In her first book, she was especially interested in the splitting apart of personal versus objective writing styles. In addition to her many articles, see *The Shaping of Art History: Wilhelm Voegelé, Adolph Goldschmidt, and the Study of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

who can find ourselves on deeply intimate terms with works of art, without becoming scholars or academics. If prepared through practice, viewers can experience works of art as immediate experiences, things to be penetrated with their entire being rather than objects of intellectual stimulation that are preserved in theories and reclaimed through books with very specialized access, at best. To approach art with a desire to grasp it fully is to approach it with reverence for what is divine in human creation and with the conviction that it has the power to lift us above the mundane and make us aware of the mystery and wonder of the human spirit. To do so is demanding; it requires discipline, practice, and preparedness.

It might be appropriate to examine some of the religious uses of art in the past: why have people really looked at art? This is an interesting and complex topic in its own right, very well studied and documented, and of interest to us primarily insofar as it helps us understand how it differs from the present project. Most curious is the church's position on images, its anxiety and recurrent attempts to prevent the laity from engaging in what it perceived as idol worship.

This was especially problematic in the later Middle Ages, when religious images were readily available in churches, on street corners, in graveyards, in the home—even to the person of humblest means.⁸ It was a time of intense piety, and images shaped the religious imagination as much as preaching did. In fact, preachers adopted many of their narrative anecdotes for sermons from available statuary and painting.⁹ In many ways, the Church's attitude toward religious imagery confirms the power not only of imagery itself but repetitious looking, which, after all, is integral to idol worship as an activity.

The spiritual value of looking at art, however, ought not be limited to religious imagery. Other periods and styles of art can be profoundly transforming, too. Things today, for example, are vastly different from the way they were in the Middle Ages. Art has been secularized, to use a favorite art historical term, which means the subject matter seldom is concerned with religious themes. Also, there are many new formats and techniques that were not available to artists of earlier times: photography,

⁸ Joanna E. Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pieta and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c.1300–c.1600* (Brussels and Rome: 1992).

⁹ The classic history of the migration from image to word is in Franciscan preaching, particularly the recipes they used called *exempla*. One may consult various works by Caroline Walker Bynum, Walter Simons, and Jean-Claude Schmitt on this topic.

lithographic printing, installation, silkscreen, video, and so on. Yet art without religious subject matter can be as much about creation and offer as many opportunities for spiritual transformation as can strictly religious works of art. I should make it clear that for the time being, I use the word "art" to mean the art of museums—the paintings, sculpture, and drawings of the past. We will—and should—extend that meaning to include other art forms, such as music, dance, singing, and acting. When we learn to open our eyes, minds, and hearts to the life of the human spirit in art—indeed, when that is our fundamental reason for viewing art—the categories and terminology that specialists use to distinguish one art form from another, or the implications about importance or value which they draw from such distinctions, quickly become immaterial. As de Waal shows her readers the way "from the monastery to the kitchen," I similarly encourage the present reader to make the practice of looking at art a lived experience—as much for the housewife as for the scholar.

Some Moments in the History of Looking at Images

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide more than a brief look at the role of religious images in Western civilization, history offers crucial evidence of the power of looking as a religious activity, as well as insight into our own views—dare I say prejudices—on the value of art as a religious experience today.

In the history of Christianity, there have been two periods when the response to the worship of religious images was violent in the extreme: in Byzantium between 726 and 842, and in Western Europe during the sixteenth century.¹⁰ In both periods, the conflict over religious images was tantamount to civil warfare. On the one side, the iconoclasts attacked the veneration of images as "idolatry" and, on the other, the iconophiles literally wept with anguish over the desecration of sacred sites and imagery. In the latter period, the Reformation, churches were sacked and burned; sculptures were beheaded, urinated on, and thrown into rivers; altars were overturned; and consecrated hosts were fed to animals. The accounts from both periods of the destruction reveal the sadness and horror of watching as nearly everything considered materially holy was

¹⁰ There were other iconoclastic movements during the French and Russian Revolutions. Western Europe lost for a second time many of its religious artifacts during the Napoleonic Occupations.

literally cast down, trodden upon, and otherwise desecrated. The consequences of the Reformation are still with us, much more tangibly than those of the earlier Byzantine Iconoclasm. After all, Protestant attitudes toward imagery, which draw the line between material and spiritual worship, have defined one of the central differences between Protestants and Catholics.¹¹

Although since Vatican II in the 1960s the church has downplayed the external objects of devotion—the material imagery and church ornaments—newer Catholic churches nonetheless reflect a tradition of imagery, in banners and stained glass, which Protestantism has scorned since the sixteenth century. What these periods of violent destruction of images reveal is how deeply affective images could be, positively as well as negatively. One is not moved to destroy sculptures and paintings without having witnessed their effect on people.¹² As art historian David Freedberg describes in his monumental study, *The Power of Images*, “People have smashed images for political reasons and for theological ones; they have destroyed works which have roused their ire or their shame; they have done so spontaneously or because they have been directed to do so. The motives for such acts have been and continues to be endlessly discussed, naturally enough; but in every case we must assume that it is the image—whether to a greater or lesser degree—that arouses the iconoclast to such ire.”¹³ Freedberg insists that “the power of images is much greater than is generally admitted.”¹⁴ This is important. On some basic level, religious images have been deemed dangerous because they appear to steer the believer away from a cerebral, fully spiritual, and immaterial knowledge of God and toward a sense that the material thing itself, that is, the painting or sculpture, is somehow interchangeable—if not identical—with what is represented. We have a powerful reminder of this in the mighty wrath of Moses, incurred when he saw his people worshipping a graven image as though the image itself was divine.

Even in our own time, religious images such as Michelangelo’s *Pieta* in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome still arouse anger and violence as well

¹¹ Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹² Consult the brilliant though much-neglected short essay by David Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and Their Motives* (Maarsse: 1985).

¹³ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10–11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 429.

as—perhaps even because of—displays of intense piety and affection. Ironically, Michelangelo himself found excessive devotion to religious images to be extremely distasteful.¹⁵ Current attitudes toward religious art bear some imprint of this past ambivalence and conflict. There is a view, perhaps a fear, that religious imagery can occupy the believer with an artificial presence rather than with a genuinely spiritual response. Church furnishings and decoration became noticeably spare in the wake of Vatican II, after which there evolved two, almost mutually exclusive, generations of believers: the older clinging to their statuary, calendars, and household pictures of Jesus, Mary, and the saints—the younger finding such images anachronistic, unnecessary, even somewhat ludicrous. Most of my current students at the College of the Holy Cross, for instance, claim that they have never prayed to a statue.

The academic disciplines, on the other hand, are fascinated by the isolated continuation of traditional devotion to images. The field of anthropology, for example, has produced numerous studies on Italian feast days (such as those centered on effigies of Saint Anthony), practices of ritual, and image devotion among the native Americans in the Southwest. The academic study and individual enclaves of active image devotion, particularly in Hispanic cultures, stand apart from the attitude of most practicing Catholics in America and Europe (albeit not the oldest generation), who generally find any form of devotion to imagery excessive and even ridiculous.

Yet the irony is that people still generally believe that for art to be spiritually efficacious, it must portray or reflect religious subject matter. There is a clear separation of religious from secular art in the minds of most people fostering spiritual purposes. Liturgical art guilds today, for example, are dedicated to promoting artists, but the art produced must be religious in nature, either in function (liturgical vestments, for example) or subject matter (portrayals of Christ and the Holy Family, and so on). Even folk music, introduced as part of the Catholic liturgy in the 1960s, makes reference in its lyrics to the sacred nature of things and experience. Study groups at local churches sponsor talks and workshops on the history of religious art and music. Although the changes in forms and attitudes in the second half of this century from devotional art of the past have been radical to say the least, what has not changed is the belief that for art to be useful in a spiritual way, it needs to communicate

¹⁵ Joanna Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval *Pieta*: Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?" *Gesta* vol. 34, no. 1 (1995): 28–36.

and narrate Christian themes, motifs, and persons. In other words, religious art has undergone significant changes in the twentieth century, with one fundamental exception: for art to serve a religious purpose, it still must be concerned with religious subject matter.

Contemplation and Looking

Throughout the history of Christian art, there have been times when the activity of art—making it and looking at it—has been viewed as a serious and worthy spiritual activity in its own right. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, nuns and beguines were involved in art-making practices that constituted a form of prayer: making was praying. The beguines, lay holy women who lived a communal religious life, provide a fascinating example of the identification of detailed manual work with prayer.¹⁶ As a way of grasping what we are about to explore, it is not at all inappropriate, I believe, to call to mind the modern image of the beguines as thoroughly rapt in the activity of making lace, for which they were renowned. Early-twentieth-century beguines often were photographed bent over their little lace looms, heads hung as hands carried out the exquisitely detailed work of creating the ornamental patterns of the lace. The modern tourist industry in fact equates the religious life of the beguines with the manual labor that produced their famous manufactured product, lace. Day in and day out, the beguines' world looks inward on the combined activities of work and prayer, often merging as though they are one. These modern icons of lace-making beguines are signposts, guides into the past. They reveal a tradition in the beguines' life of a merging, an identity, of close, repetitious manual labor and prayer life.

Since earliest times, beguines were engaged in the cloth-making industry—spinning, carding, dying, and weaving wool. They also cleaned, scrubbing floors and washing laundry, and gardened. They baked and counted hosts for the liturgy. Their days were dedicated mostly to this sort of repetitious manual labor. It seems appropriate, then, that when beguines began to make art, it was the art of handicraft.

¹⁶ I first introduced the spiritual nature of the relationship between the beguines and their manual labor in *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pieta and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c.1300–c.1600* (Brussels and Rome: The Belgian Historical Institute of Rome, 1992).

The first creations for which they become known were so-called enclosed gardens, which were little worlds populated by religious figurines, in lavish artificial settings, and framed with glass.¹⁷ The beguines made all parts themselves. For them, the discipline and concentration required for making the gardens was a form of religious activity, a form of prayer, if you will. Like the chanting of the holy hours of the day (prime, terce, sext, and so on), the making of these highly detailed shrines was itself a daily ritual realized, however, in manual rather than vocal form.

Art historian Jeffrey Hamburger raises a similar issue in his book, *Nuns as Artists*.¹⁸ Hamburger studies twelve drawings produced around 1500 at the convent of St. Walburg—near Eichstatt in Franconia, which now is part of Bavaria, Germany—seeking to understand them within the devotional practices of the nuns who made and used them. He believes the drawings—with their unusual iconography and childlike drawing style—to be the work of a single, anonymous nun. Although engaging in its own right, Hamburger's study offers some points that directly relate to the concerns of this essay.

In the first place, he contends that the nuns' devotions were enacted through their eyes: "As defined by the drawings, to look is to love, and to love is to look";¹⁹ "Sight itself becomes the subject of the image."²⁰ The drawings have unusual images, such as those titled "The Heart on the Cross" or "The Heart as a House," whereby the nuns were drawn through the wound of Christ's heart to the soul "nesting" there, "like a bird . . . in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall."²¹ This devotion to Christ's heart is what Hamburger calls the "wounding look of love."²² Looking, then, is praying, according to Hamburger.

For these nuns, the goal of mystical devotion was to unite with Christ and feel his love. As we learn, some incredibly imaginative nun fashioned that love into images of Christ's own heart, which literally could be penetrated, entered, and felt sensuously just by looking. This goes far beyond our customary understanding of devotional practices that involve contemplating images or symbols of Christ. In Hamburger's view, passionate

¹⁷ Joanna Ziegler, "Beguines," *Dictionary of Art*, vol. 3 (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996), 502–5.

¹⁸ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116, 166, and 219.

²² *Ibid.*, 128.

looking is a devotional end in itself. Looking is praying. Hamburger argues that, "In the handiwork of nuns, the two meanings [of *operor*, "to keep busy" and "to be engaged in worship"] converged: work itself was a form of worship."²³ In keeping with the Benedictine ideal of *ora et labora* (prayer and work), religious women throughout the Middle Ages were instructed to lead a life of pious work and prayer—"laboring like the Virgin with her spindle and thread."²⁴ Although Hamburger only hints at the true nature of this activity, he understands that repetitive work like weaving, calligraphy, and drawing—what we moderns now call "art"—is grounded in the body, encoded as eye-hand skills. Making is therefore intimately intertwined with seeing and feeling: hand, eyes, and heart as the vehicles and the ends of prayer. There is a lesson to be drawn from these medieval examples: a link exists between spirituality and the physical body; that perhaps the way to reach the divine is achieved not only by moving beyond the body but also by deepening the experience of the body through daily, concentrated, disciplined physical activity. Might there not be intrinsic value in work, defined this way then, not as a reference to ourselves (as self-promotion or self-gratification) but as a way to create a time for contemplation and a body that is ready for the physical demands of contemplation? Nuns and beguines were motivated by their superiors and conditioned by the religious culture of the time to pursue work as a form of prayer. How, then, can we achieve, within the nature of our largely secular reality, some of the same integration? Let us consider some thoughts on accomplishing this goal.

Ora et Labora: Practice and Contemplation Today

Should we wish to deepen our spiritual lives, we must find dependable, workable forms of such practice, as well as times when we can prepare the body to work with the eyes and the heart—as did the nuns and beguines in earlier times. Our means will differ from theirs, of course. Our culture differs; our daily routines and habits differ; and our expectations and reasons for pursuing spiritual matters differ. Even if religion is important to us, the context in which we live is a largely secular one. I contend, however, that learning to make and look at art is wholly appropriate to our present culture. This is achieved by heightening the skills of looking and listening, which can only be gained through

²³ Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion*, 95–113; Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 184.

²⁴ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 186.

discipline, rigor, and daily routine. Beholders eventually assume some identity with the art and ultimately the artist.

Although young people like to believe creativity is a possession—either you have it or you don't—creativity actually is a product, built on a foundation of practice. The very essence of practice is habit and daily routine. The dancer, for instance, must exercise daily and in a dependable, repeatable pattern. Ballet class always begins with the dancers doing simple arm and leg movements at the barre, then movements on the floor, and finally rehearsing strenuous choreography involving the entire studio space. Every ballet dancer knows this sequence by heart—in body as well as mind. Certain movements become entirely inscribed in the body—for example, specific arm positions—so that they no longer need to be consciously recalled when learning choreography or when actually giving a performance.

Routine practice gives rise to creative expression: it is not identical with it, but is its prerequisite. Artistry is when technique is so encoded in the body that pure freedom from technique can be achieved. For artist and audience—which is the point I wish to emphasize—the fullest experience of an art form comes with practice. Like the pianist practicing her scales, so too must beholders practice, if they are to penetrate the deeper meaning of creative expression.

Where contemplation enters this picture is that the discipline of daily, habitualized repetitive activity, encoded in the body, is a form of contemplative practice. Asian practices of yogic meditation and the martial arts have long been recognized as demanding daily repetition of prescribed physical activity. Western art also affords this possibility of providing the practical discipline that underlies the contemplative act—for artist as well as audience.

To introduce students to the theory and practice of these ideas, I require them to visit the local museum, the Worcester Art Museum, on a weekly basis. (Ideally, daily visits would be preferable but are not possible for college students.) It has been an effective and wonderful assignment, one which students often have resisted at first but embraced by the end—one of the best signs that practice works. Students were asked to choose a painting by one of three artists: Thomas Gainsborough (English, eighteenth-century portraitist and landscape painter), Claude Monet (the French Impressionist), or Robert Motherwell (American Abstract Expressionist). None of these pictures, by the way, has a religious subject matter. The students were required to write one paper a week on the same painting for the entire semester—thirteen weeks, thirteen papers in all—each essentially the same, but reworked, refined, and rewritten. Students

were asked not to consult any outside reading, even including the wall text provided by the Museum. Instead, I asked them to describe, as simply and directly as they could, "what they see," what is on the canvas, in a maximum of five typed pages. Notes and paper had to be turned in every week, and the students—in addition to other classroom work—returned to the Museum to repeat the assignment the following week.

The students were resistant at first, anxious over whether they would be able to find anything to write about, especially thirteen times in succession. Also, the notion of a repetitive activity other than sports or body-building (examples of great value in this context, by the way, for their nature as daily routine leading to "performance") was downright unattractive. The results, however, have been remarkable. The essays transformed tangibly from personalized, almost narcissistic, responses to descriptions firmly grounded in the picture. Descriptions evolved from being fraught with willful interpretation, indeed selfishness (students actually expressed hostility at being made to go the Museum once a week), to revealing some truth about the painting on its own terms. Most importantly, students developed a personal relationship with what became known as "my" work of art. It was a work they knew by heart, could describe from memory—brushstroke, color change, and subtlety of surface texture. Through repeated, habitual, and direct experience (not working from slides or photographs but confronting the real work of art), students were transformed from superficial spectators, dependent on written texts for their knowledge, into skilled, disciplined beholders with a genuine claim to a deep and intimate knowledge of a single work of art—and they knew it. Moreover, they learned that with practice, any work of art could be accessible to them on its own terms.

This assignment bears the essential ingredients for becoming a practiced beholder of any art form—be it music, dance, acting, or the visual arts. In the first place, the activity is a part of daily life. Students came to depend on the time in the Museum as the one routine in their harried lives they could count on. Many of them described it as "my time in the week when I get to be alone: just me and my painting." Looking at "their" work of art became a habit. It was a habit not only because it occurred weekly but because there was a repeated pattern to the activity, which I prescribed: taking a cab at the same time each week, entering the same door of the museum, sitting in the same place, looking at the same object, indeed returning time and again to one place. Interestingly, this resonates with at least one form of instruction in prayer: Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, instructed his followers to return to the same place at the

same time every day as an aid to prayer and preparation to hear the word of God.²⁵

At the heart of the contemplative activity lies repetition, for that is what frees the mind. With daily practice, the whole being and the whole person become ready to look and to listen. As my students experienced, full awareness of the object of their attention was possible only when looking had become habitual routine rather than demanding drudgery. Similar to other forms of genuine contemplative activity, looking also demands concentration, the result of routine physical discipline. To be ready—to be open—arises first from practice.

Although an assignment given to college students, this practice has a message for teaching us a range of ways to strengthen our inner lives. Becoming a practiced beholder of art is actually a wide-ranging exercise, which can become a vital part of spiritual experience because, above all else, it teaches us how to cultivate concentrated awareness by repetition and physical ritual. Although, as I indicated, I focused on looking at paintings in museums, the pattern of activity is applicable to other art forms. Learn one work well and experience it routinely. Pick a Beethoven piano sonata, for example, and learn it by heart. Play the same song again and again, until every line and every nuance is second nature. Then begin to listen to other performances, learning those equally well by heart. Do this every day, at the same time and in the same place. You will come to know, in the deepest sense, a work of incomparable creativity—as well as at least one of the performances that has brought this work into being. This is nothing short of a contemplative activity, which has opened you to the full expressive power of a work of art.

Learning one work of art well is demanding. It requires discipline and practice, as well as a commitment to developing a long-term routine. Every art form makes essentially the same demands upon its practitioners. Audiences should approach art with the same spirit if they wish to enter fully into the creative wonder. The same fundamental principle holds true in the performing arts. Performance is the result of rigorously encoded physical and mental habits. Singers and musicians begin their study, as well as their practice sessions, with the most repetitive activity

²⁵ I wish to thank Brian Linnane, SJ, and Jim Hayes, SJ, for this insight. Father Linnane led a mini-retreat at Collegium in 1996, where he outlined the idea of repetition as a preparation for prayer, that it offers something dependable and reliable when we often are not in our moods and emotions. Father Hayes taught a class in *The Art of Contemplation* seminar in 1998, covering many of the issues of prayer and practice.

imaginable: scales. Individual works are committed to memory by hours of daily repetition; they become inscribed in the mind and body of the performer.

Many actors do the same, although audiences are less prepared to understand the nature of creativity in theater than in almost any other art form. Acting is so much a product of the marketplace, with its celebration of superficial values of stardom, that the power and beauty of the art form are all but completely obscured. Yet acting is an art form, too, whose artistry is the result of practice and discipline. That genius of the theater, Konstantin Stanislavski, developed a system for teaching acting that was grounded in the principles of physical repetition and routine activity. Actors are taught to come into contact with their emotions through repeated physical actions. By disciplining one's body, the emotions could be channeled. Audiences have little knowledge of such practices. Yet, returning to the same performance over and over will reveal their effectiveness.

It is essential to understand that this is not as simple as recognizing that "practice makes perfect." We enter the full artistry of the actor's art only by repeated viewing and greater awareness of the foundation in repeated, encoded, physical action. This entails, as well, a transformation in our own practices and habits.

Conclusion

Habitualized practice is a foundation for what we earlier called "mindfulness." It gives beholders access to works of art as genuine embodiments of the human spirit. I emphasize, however, that what I mean by this is that daily practice can teach us to enter into a work of art as a thing in its own right. It teaches us to leave our will behind and approach objects on their own terms. There are two wonderful lessons in this that unite in a single idea: the search for truth requires discipline and habit and it is attainable in things outside ourselves. This is a contemplative practice. The development of concentrated awareness—"mindfulness"—is essential if we mean to find the spiritual life we are seeking. It involves the whole person—mind, heart, and body—which for centuries has been the vital sign of meaningful spiritual experiences.

Concentrated awareness must be learned, however. My goal is to teach students that art offers the unique opportunity for experiencing the great paradox of creativity: it is simultaneously a function of extreme rigor

and practice and the manifestation of true freedom. There is something genuinely spiritual in this paradox, for contemplative ritual teaches artist and beholder alike about stability and fidelity to one thing. Perseverance and steadfastness promise readiness—and only with readiness can the freedom to transcend the activity and journey to the utterly spectacular realm of creativity become reality.²⁶ “Let your heart take courage, yea, wait for the Lord” (Ps 50).

“Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art.” (Stanislavski)

²⁶ As always, I thank Joe Vecchione for his unwavering interest in my work and his willingness to discuss it on what must seem endless occasions. I thank him for his editing, as well, which is always the paragon of sensitivity.

Catholic colleges and universities have long engaged in conversation about how to fulfill their mission in creative ways across the curriculum. The “sacramental vision” of Catholic higher education posits that God is made manifest in the study of all disciplines.

Becoming Beholders is the first book to share pedagogical strategies about how to do that. Twenty faculty—from many religious backgrounds and teaching in fields as varied as chemistry, economics, English, history, mathematics, sociology, and theology—discuss ways that their teaching nourishes students’ ability to find the transcendent in their studies.

KAREN E. EIFLER is professor of education and co-director of the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture at the University of Portland in Oregon. She is the author of *A Month of Mondays: Spiritual Lessons from Catholic Classrooms* (ACTA Publications, 2011) and has been published in many journals, including *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, *Transformational Education*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, and *The Teaching Professor*.

THOMAS M. LANDY is director of the Rev. Michael C. McFarland, SJ, Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross and is currently engaged in an initiative at the McFarland Center to study Catholic life and practice around the globe. He is the editor of and a contributor to the book *As Leaven for the World: Catholic Reflections on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life* (Sheed and Ward, 2001). Landy is the 2009 recipient of the John Henry Newman Medal, which honors exemplars of Jesuit Catholic education, from Loyola College in Maryland.

“*Becoming Beholders* inspired several ideas to transform my teaching and of how to answer a question I’ve always struggled with: how can my ordinarily secular physics courses become so much more in light of the Catholic intellectual tradition?”

—**Gintaras Duda**, Associate Professor of Physics, Creighton University
2013 Carnegie/CASE US Professor of the Year

“How can you teach at a Catholic college and not be Catholic, I’ve wondered. These essays explain how and they do more: they make you want to teach there.”

—**Maryellen Weimer**, Professor Emeritus of Teaching and Learning
Penn State University

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