

Why Do We Still Go to Museums in the Age of Digital Images?

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Lately, I've been reading *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, and a passage in the first chapter struck me deeply:

"It is no longer what [the artwork] says that is unique, but what it is."

This shift in emphasis—from *meaning* to *objecthood*—is inseparable from the invention of photography, which, as Berger argues, shattered the uniqueness of artworks by detaching them from their original settings. A fresco was once embedded in a church wall; a sculpture, in a temple. The artwork and its site were once inseparable—space was part of the story.

Photography disrupted this structure. Once reproduced, the image of the artwork could travel freely, severed from its spatial and historical context. Art became light, mobile, and de-sited. It no longer belonged to a place.

This made me reflect on how many of us—myself included—walk into a museum. Are we truly "looking"? Or are we simply enacting a kind of pilgrimage, where the act of presence matters more than perception?

I recall my own "pilgrimage moment": I was twelve years old when I saw the original *Starry Night* for the first time. I entered the room with an almost sacred reverence, yet found myself unable to see the painting front-on due to the crowd. I stood at an angle, almost by accident—and from that position, I saw something unexpected: the thickness of the brushstrokes, the violent texture of the paint, the wildness of matter.

In that quiet, sideways moment, I realized: this wasn't just an iconic image. It was the material trace of a moment in 1889, a night when Van Gogh stood before the canvas, turpentine thick in the air, his brush trembling with sadness and urgency. It was not the image I encountered—it was the evidence of a hand, a gesture, a body.

And that, I now believe, is why we continue to seek out original works in person. Not because we distrust reproductions, but because there is something we still need to confirm—something that only happens in the presence of the work.

Berger writes, elsewhere in the same chapter:

“All paintings are contemporary.”

“The silence and stillness of the original is something a reproduction cannot convey.”

This is how I’ve come to understand what we call *presence*. It isn’t sacred, nor is it scarce—but it is material. The scale, texture, brushwork, and residue of time—all constitute a type of embodied knowledge that cannot be replicated digitally.

I later brought these reflections to a conversation with a curator friend. She said, quite simply:

“A digital photograph will never replace the feeling of standing in front of a sculpture someone carved thousands of years ago.”

What we often call *aura* or *authenticity* may, in fact, be a form of structural empathy—a moment when our bodies encounter the traces of another’s, across time.

I’m not a curator myself, but if I were to imagine the future of exhibition-making, I would hope for a return to this spatial entanglement between artwork and environment. A return to a time before the camera, when art was immobile, embedded, and bound to memory.

Let us stop thinking of space as merely a container for art. Let it instead become part of the narrative.

And perhaps then, when viewers leave an exhibition, they’ll remember more than an image—they’ll recall a specific, unrepeatable experience of being *there*.

最近在读《观看之道》第一章，有一个观点让我产生了很大的共鸣：

摄影的出现打破了艺术作品的独特性，使它们脱离了原本所依附的场所。

“它不再因‘说了什么’而独特，而是因为‘它是什么’。”

这个“它是什么”其实是对“原作性”的重新定义。艺术作品原本与其展出场所之间有深度的关联——教堂中的壁画、神庙中的雕像，空间本身就是作品叙事的一部分。摄影打破了这种结构，复制品可以无限传播，艺术不再专属于一个“地方”，它变得轻盈，也变得脱域。

这让我想起很多人进入美术馆的状态——包括我自己。我们是否真的在“看”？还是说，我们更多时候是在完成一次“朝圣”？

这让我想到我小时候的一个故事：我在12岁那年第一次看到《星夜》的原作——我带着一种朝圣式的情绪进入展厅，却意外地，在人群挤满正面的情况下，从画作的侧面，看到了密集且狂烈的颜料笔触。

那一瞬间，我突然意识到，这不是“星夜”的图像，而是一块曾经真实发生过的时间、身体、情绪的凝结。我仿佛在那个角度，看见了梵高在1889年的某一个夜晚落下的那一笔——带着刺鼻的气味，带着微醺与悲怆。

正因为这种经验无法复制，我们才会反复进入展览现场去“确认”它。

回到 Berger，他还说过一句我非常喜欢的话：

“所有绘画都是当代(contemporary)的。”

“原作的沉默与静止，是复制品所无法提供的。”

这让我理解了所谓“在场感”的本质。它不是神圣或稀缺，而是物质性的、可触的历史残留。这种通过材质、笔触、尺度、手势所构成的经验，是数字图像无法还原的。

我带着我的想法去和一位策展人朋友讨论，她认为：“数字照片无法替代几千年前，有一个人站在它前面雕刻时的身体感。”

所谓情怀，其实是一种结构性的身体共感。

我不是专业做策展的，但如果可以畅想一下，我希望未来的展览空间能够重新构建作品与场所的联系——回溯到相机发明之前，艺术是和空间共生的，是和记忆绑定的，是非移动的。

不只用空间“收纳”作品，而是让空间成为叙事的一部分。也许这样，观众走出展厅时，不只是记住了一张图像，而是经历了一段不可被复刻的“在场”。