

“ ‘A museum should be a place where we lose our head,’ said [Father] Couturier. . . The truth is that we are not prepared to lose our head. We have been trained not to, trained by emphasis on analysis, on virtuosity, on ‘accomplishments.’ Except for music, the natural longing for enchantment is discouraged in our culture. And what is art if it does not enchant? Art is incantation. Like Jacob’s ladder it leads to higher realities, to timelessness, to paradise. It is the fusion of the tangible and the intangible; the old hierogamy myth—the marriage of heaven and earth.”

– Dominique de Menil



Getting Up Close and Personal With ART

By Heather McLean Wiederhoeft

For many people, a trip to Rome, Paris, Chicago, New York or London would not be complete without a visit to see some of the amazing fine arts collections housed in museums in these cities. Whether a first-time museum visitor or a long-time aficionado of the fine arts, the famed museums of the world often are a must when traveling.

What some may not realize is that Houston has a magnificent collection of fine art that can be seen every day. “Houston’s showpieces are the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) and The Menil Collection,” explains Father Jack Hanna, C.S.B., dean of the language department at St. Thomas High School and part-time faculty member in the University of St. Thomas Spanish department. Hanna also has been sharing his passion for art through his semester-long class in art history with St. Thomas High School students. “The Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) is a truly cutting-edge museum but differing from MFAH and The Menil in that it doesn’t have a permanent collection but, by definition, a contemporary arts collection is of the moment.”

While both MFAH and Menil have spectacular collections, they are quite different. “MFAH is what is called an encyclopedic museum which means you can see art from the early Greeks and Romans up through modern and, sometimes, contemporary art,” says Hanna. “MFAH constantly is expanding its overall collection such as in the Asian, Latin American and Indian collections.”



Matisse

MFAH currently has nearly 60,000 pieces of artwork in its representative collection.

“The Menil Collection is a specialized collection but it is truly a spectacular array that exemplifies the areas that Dominique de Menil was interested in from prehistoric to modern day,” adds Hanna.

For Art’s Sake

Ask any student who has taken Hanna’s art history course and you’ll quickly learn of his great enthusiasm not only for art but for encouraging students to be open to the arts. Like many, though, his first experience with the fine arts wasn’t driven from within but from a college counselor. “When I was a freshman at the University of St. Thomas, I went to see my advisor and he decided I should take art history,” recalls Hanna. “I didn’t know anything about art so I said okay and that first course is what woke me up to art. I was learning the stories behind the painting and of the artists which made the art itself even more interesting.”

Sometimes taking that first step into the unknown can be daunting. When it comes to visiting an art museum, the first-time visitor may not even make it to the door because they’re just unsure of what to look for or how to proceed. Fortunately for Houstonians, our museums have wonderfully enthusiastic and educated docents who are readily available to make the novice feel comfortable. Docents are volunteer museum educators who have received specialized training from the



Corot



Heda

museums. “It’s amazing when I visit MFAH and see a docent guiding a group of elementary students,” explains Hanna. “These women and men are such experts at not only being able to explain the art but getting the children to describe what they are seeing. Most of the younger students may have the attention span of a gnat but they’re experiencing a museum.” At MFAH, docents will lead visitors on a 20- or 45-minute guided gallery talk.

Art museums also have many formal and informal programs where all members of the community are welcome. MFAH, The Menil Collection and CMA all offer a wide variety of programs, both during the day and evenings that are posted on their Web sites. These programs can be a terrific way for the new museum visitor to better understand a collection or an art genre.

Another hidden gem of almost all art museums is that there are times when there is no admission fee. Here in Houston, both The Menil Collection and the Contemporary Arts Museum are always free for general admission. MFAH has no fee all day every Thursday from 10 a.m. – 9 p.m., and children 18 and under can receive free general admission on Saturdays and Sundays by presenting a public library card.

It’s better in person

There are many amazing books on art history filled with spectacular photographs of artwork. The Internet also has numerous sites where



the user can view artwork while learning more about the artist and his creation. But art truly comes to life when you have a face-to-face experience.

“One of the things you learn when teaching art history is that a student can look at a book or a high quality slide, but the experience is so much more vivid when the art is seen in person,” says Hanna. “For example, 20th Century artists were happy to let their audience see the process of the painting such as viewing their brush strokes. At MFAH, there is a beautiful piece by Henri Matisse titled *Woman in a Purple Coat*. For this work, Matisse used the butt end of his brush to scrape off thin lines for the purple coat. You can certainly see the lines in a photograph of this piece but when you view it in person, the experience of his achievement is simply much more.”

Once you’ve made the decision to visit one of Houston’s art museums, where do you start? At the end of each semester, Father Hanna brings his art history students on an “art crawl” as their final exam. This also could be the start for anyone new to Houston’s fine arts scene. “Our four-hour trip starts at the Menil and ends at the MFAH,” says Hanna. “I’ve found that this is a good amount for a solid first visit. When I take my students, we certainly do not try and see everything because that would take weeks to accomplish.”

Some tips for your own art crawl would include:

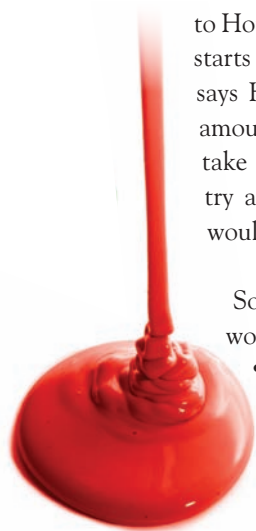
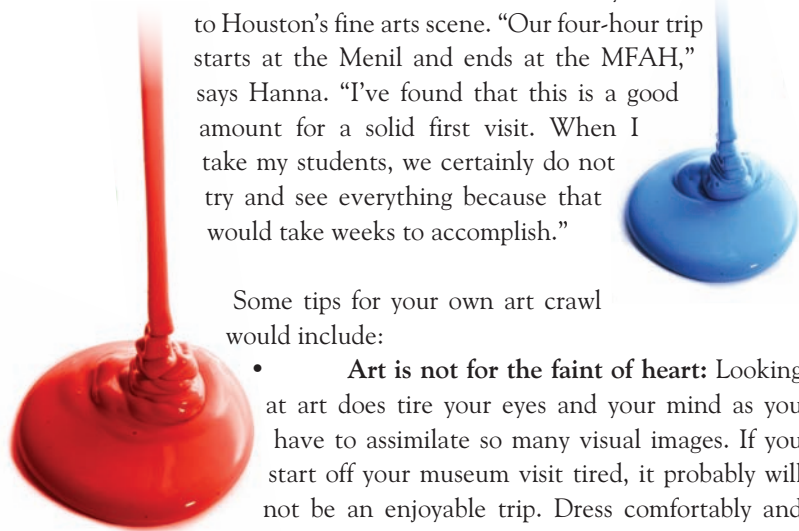
- **Art is not for the faint of heart:** Looking at art does tire your eyes and your mind as you have to assimilate so many visual images. If you start off your museum visit tired, it probably will not be an enjoyable trip. Dress comfortably and when you’re starting to tire, call it a day.
- **Bring a notebook:** If you see a piece of artwork that catches your attention, jot down the name of the artist and the piece. This way you can read more about the artist or look for more

examples of his or her work online or in an art book.

- **Leave your camera behind:** Instead of spending time trying to snap photos of the artwork you’re enjoying on your first trip, take the time to really study it and don’t be distracted by your camera.
- **Consider separating from your group:** If you’re visiting the MFAH or Menil with a friend or family and you find that you’re not all at the same pace, go ahead and see the museum on your own. “I have a very good friend who I often go to museums with,” says Hanna. “We arrive at the museum together but we split up because he’s very slow and I’m quick but will spend more time at certain things. At the end, we meet up and neither of us has had to worry about how the other is enjoying the museum.” After your visit, you and your family or friends can then share your thoughts on what you enjoyed about your trip.
- **You’re never too young for art:** Introducing your child to art is a true gift. A visit to a museum doesn’t have to be long – just what you think your child can enjoy. Ask him or her about the artwork you are looking at and really listen to what he or she says. When the attention span seems to have come to an end, you could enjoy lunch or take a walk through Hermann Park and talk about what you’ve seen. “So many people mistakenly think that a trip to a museum is an extraordinary thing where you have to get all dressed up and should be saved for special occasions,” says Hanna. “Let your kids see that going to a museum is just another fun thing to do.”

There’s so much to see in the permanent collections of The Menil and MFAH that it’s really up to each individual to decide where to start. Before your visit begins, visit the museum’s Web site that can give you an idea of what currently is on display.

Not surprisingly, Hanna has many pieces he enjoys at The Menil and MFAH. What would he recommend to first-time visitors from the permanent collections? “At MFAH, there is a wonderful painting that I can look at again and again by Willem Claesz Heda called *Banquet*



Art in striking distance of Houston

Heading to the state fair this fall? Enjoy a weekend watching the Longhorns in Austin? If so, consider putting a little time aside for an art crawl close by:

- **Dallas:** The Dallas Museum of Art is another encyclopedic museum with 23,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years. Right next to it is the Nasher Sculpture Center, one of the few institutions devoted to the study, exhibition and preservation of modern sculpture. Southern Methodist University's Meadows Museum has one of the largest collections of Spanish art outside of Spain.
- **Fort Worth:** The Kimbell Art Museum is a world-renowned institution. "The Kimbell is a jewel of a museum that is smaller than most at less than 350 works but each piece is absolute quality," explains Hanna. Right next to the Kimbell is the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth which focuses on post-World War II art and the Amon Carter Museum which focuses on American and Western art.
- **Austin:** The University of Texas is home to the Blanton Museum of Art, the largest university art museum in the United States. "I do believe that the Blanton is one of the top five university museums in this country," says Hanna.

with a Piece of Ham," says Hanna. "Another work that a new or infrequent visitor would be able to understand fairly easily is Matthias Stomer's *The Judgment of Solomon*, which is a Baroque work with drama, movement and chiaroscuro. Camille Corot's painting *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld* is a masterpiece that I believe is one of Corot's very best."

Ready for your art crawl? To start planning, visit the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston online at www.mfah.org, The Menil Collection at www.menil.org or the Contemporary Arts Museum at www.camh.org.



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