

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



Written by Elizabeth Jane Pustilnik

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Focus Question

Why is art important? Why do we display art in museums?

Words to Know

abstract

expressionism

artifacts

conventional

facade

galleries

highlights

intentions

intricate

mediation

replicate

sanctuary

tapestries

Front/back cover: The Metropolitan Museum of Art is the largest art museum in the United States.

Title page: An autumn view of the museum from Central Park.

Page 3: Vincent van Gogh's *Self Portrait with a Straw Hat* is one of thousands of famous works of art featured at the museum.

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Correlation

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Over six million people visit the Metropolitan Museum each year.

Introduction to the Museum

A gigantic staircase lies before me, leading up to the main entrance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. My English teacher, Ms. Kessler, gave us an assignment to take a guided tour of the museum and write an essay comparing and contrasting three works of art we see there. It sounds pointless, though. After all, isn't art just paintings on a wall?

I drag my feet, but I finally make it up the stairs and into the museum's entrance, the Great Hall. People of all ages and backgrounds are everywhere around me, speaking many different languages. Groups of adults and children sketch versions of the fine art before them.

I join a group of people gathered around a young woman who's introducing herself as Chloe. Chloe is an art history student at a nearby college who also works in the museum as a tour guide. Before the tour, Chloe informs us that the museum, which opened in 1870, is four city blocks long. It contains more than two million objects spanning from ancient times to the present. Chloe will lead us around the entire museum on a one-hour **highlights** tour. She'll show us just a few works of art out of the millions that are housed there. Chloe seems pretty cool, and now I'm curious about why she's so passionate about art. Maybe there's more to it than just pretty pictures.



Visitors first enter the Great Hall, where they find information about the museum's collection and exhibitions.

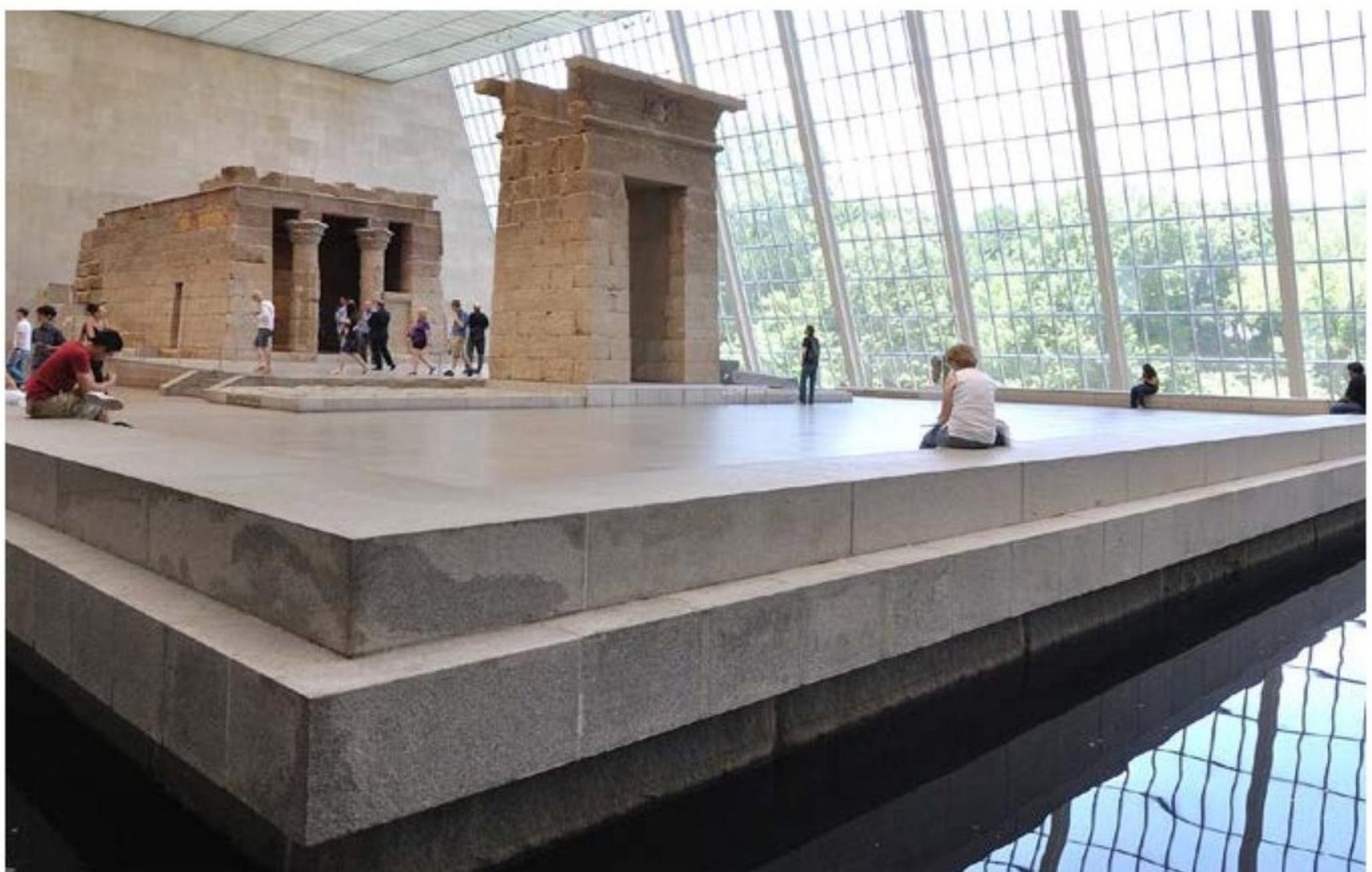


The galleries of Egyptian art include mummies and other objects found in tombs.

Egyptian Art

The first **galleries** we walk through are filled with Egyptian art. Chloe leads us past glass cases filled with mummies and other **artifacts**. I want to stop to look at them, but there's no time on this tour. The museum is huge, and I have to keep up with my group. Entering an enormous room with high ceilings, I see a real stone temple set upon a raised platform surrounded by a shallow pool of water. The temple is lit up by a huge wall of windows. Chloe says it's called the Temple of Dendur.

Chloe explains that the raising of the Aswan Dam in 1933 caused massive flooding of the Nile River. The flooding submerged the temple and other historic sites for part of each year, threatening to destroy them. In the 1960s, the rebuilding of the Aswan Dam permanently jeopardized these sites. In an effort to preserve its history, the Temple of Dendur was disassembled and shipped to New York. Then it was reassembled inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Chloe describes how this room was created to **replicate** the temple's Egyptian homeland environment. The pool represents the Nile River, and the wall of windows represents the sunlight from the temple's original outdoor location.

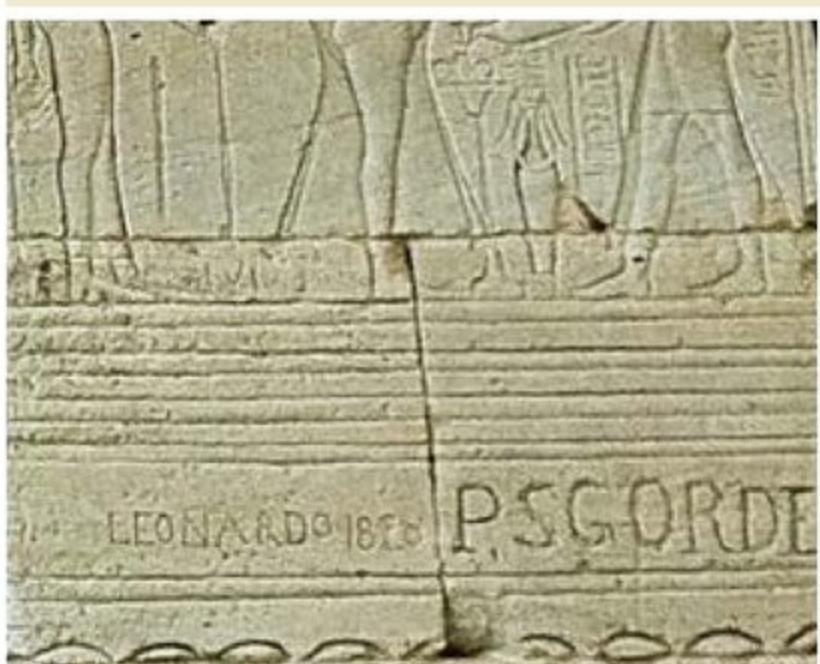
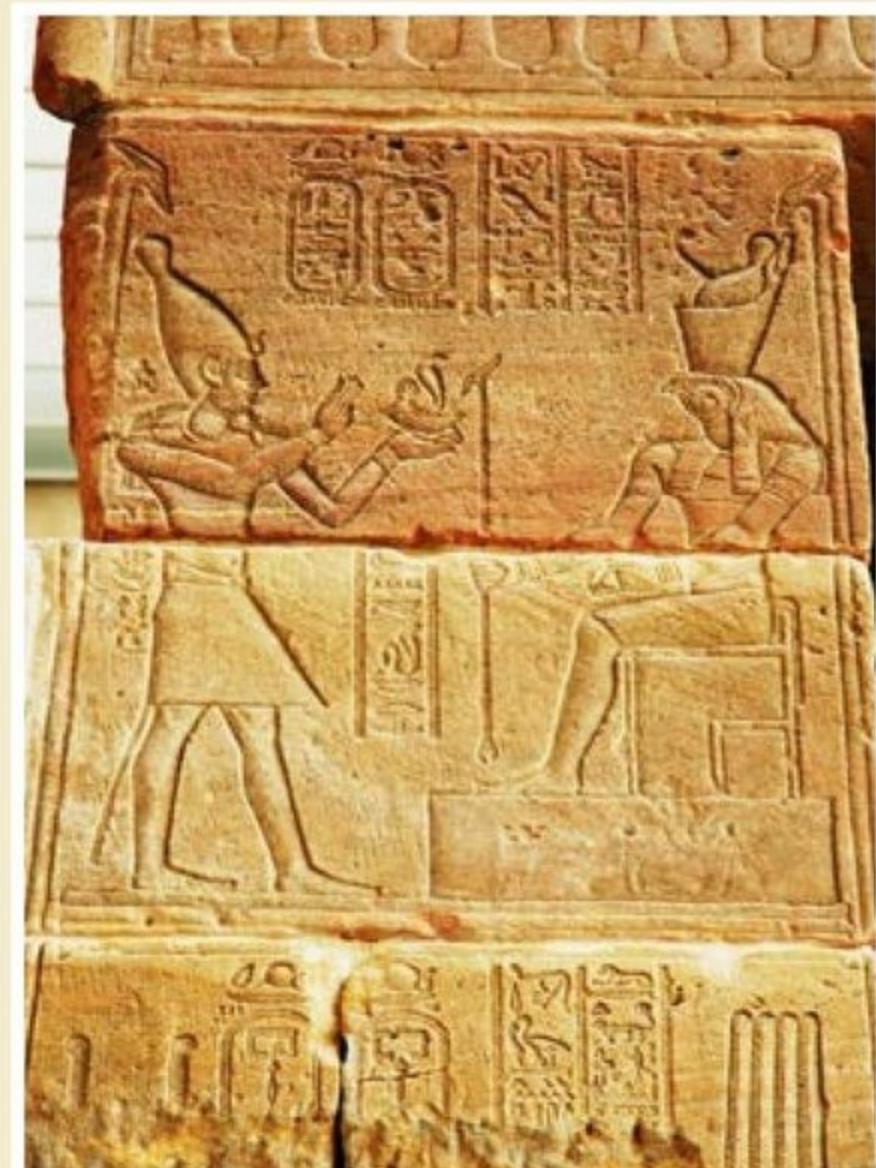


The Temple of Dendur was built around 15 BC, when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire.

Chloe tells us that a Nubian chieftain dedicated this temple to Isis, an Egyptian goddess, as well as to his two sons, Pihor and Pedesi, who drowned in the Nile. Chloe points out hieroglyphs—Egyptian writing in the form of pictures—on the building's **facade**. The pictures show princes, and even the pharaoh, making offerings to gods and goddesses.

Dendur's Hieroglyphs

Hieroglyphs, or picture writing, appear in two forms on the temple. The hieroglyphs on the exterior walls are carved in a style called *sunken relief*, in which the pictures are carved into the walls. The hieroglyphs on the interior walls are carved in a style called *raised relief*, in which the pictures actually stick out from the walls. While we rely on electricity today, in ancient times only the Sun, candles, and oil lamps provided light. Raised relief would have been easier to see and feel inside the dark room.



The temple also has examples of graffiti written in English. Travelers from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries carved their names into the temple's walls long before there was spray paint!

American Art

Chloe escorts us down a darkened hallway that leads to the wing with American art. We emerge into an enormous room lit up by a three-story wall of stained glass windows. To reach the galleries with American paintings and furniture, we climb a beautiful set of stairs.

Chloe tells us that even this staircase has a history. It was taken from the Chicago Stock Exchange Building, one of the first American skyscrapers, which was erected in 1894. I run my hand along the **intricate** geometric copper design of the banister and pause a moment to look down at all the sparkling, colorful windows lining the spacious gallery.

Entering another gallery, I immediately recognize the enormous painting before me. *Washington Crossing the Delaware* was painted by Emanuel Leutze in 1851. It depicts George Washington and his troops crossing the icy Delaware River on Christmas night in 1776.

I remember learning about this painting in American history class. George Washington led his troops in a surprise attack on a camp of British supporters.



Washington Crossing the Delaware is 12.4 x 21.5 feet (3.78 x 6.47 m).

Chloe explains that it contains several historical inaccuracies. The most obvious error is the inclusion of the American flag, which had not yet been adopted when that battle took place. Additionally, the uniforms and boats are wrong. If George Washington had stood up in a boat of that size, it most certainly would have capsized!

Chloe says that Leutze took these artistic liberties so that we'd have a stronger emotional response to the painting. Chloe also suggests that we view all art with what she calls a "critical eye." She says we shouldn't take art at face value. Instead, we should question its content and understand its history. I think I know what she means. We have to think about when, how, and why the art was made, not just what it looks like.

Arms and Armor

We head back downstairs, passing rooms filled with furniture, lamps, and other objects that recreate specific time periods. After what feels like miles, we enter a long hall. Armored knights on armored horses appear to charge toward us. Chloe leads us to a glass case holding a large French suit of armor from around 1600. Made of steel and accented with beautiful gilded details, it looks perfectly preserved. Yellow silk still lines the helmet, and the red leather straps look almost new.



Kings and other noblemen wore suits of armor on battlefields and for tournaments.

Although it's ornate, Chloe explains that the suit was worn in battle. The suit also had a matching saddle and *chanfron*, the piece of armor worn on a horse's head. I can't imagine walking around in this outfit, let alone fighting in it. It looks so heavy—and it is. Altogether, it weighs 77 pounds (34.9 kg)!

Next, Chloe leads us into a side room filled with more armor—this time helmets from Japan—worn by samurai warriors. Samurai warriors were military elite who rose to political, social, and economic power between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries in Japan.

This Japanese arms and armor collection is one of the most extensive outside of Japan. We gather in front of a display of helmets, all different from one another in material, size, and shape. I am drawn to one in particular that has a bright red flame with a tiny figurine holding a sword. Chloe explains that it's from the sixteenth century. Its shape was specifically designed to look like hats worn by older men at that time.



The figurine on the top of this samurai helmet represents a Buddhist guardian of wisdom.

Knowing the hidden history of the objects we are viewing, such as this helmet, gives me a better understanding of their purpose.



The Greek and Roman art collection holds more than seventeen thousand works of art (top). A statue from circa 450–425 BC shows a wounded Amazon warrior (right).



Greek and Roman Art

Next, we pass through dark galleries filled with detailed paintings and intricate **tapestries** from the medieval period. Then we head into the Greek and Roman Art galleries, down a long hallway lined with glistening white marble statues. Chloe explains that almost all of these statues are Roman copies of Greek sculptures, made several hundred years later. The original Greek sculptures were metal. Their bronze bodies were accented with copper and silver for details such as lips and eyelashes. I learn that bronze sculptures were plentiful in ancient Greece. Many, however, were melted down to make weapons or coins, so they're rare today.

Chloe also says that marble sculptures wouldn't have been as starkly white as the statues are today. Ancient marble statues and temples were painted in bright colors such as reds, blues, and yellows.

Leading us into a small room called a *cubiculum* (the Latin word for “bedroom”), Chloe explains that the painted walls in the room were brought to New York City from the Italian village of Boscoreale (boh-skoh-re-AH-le). She points out the wall paintings in brilliant colors that show scenes of an outdoor **sanctuary**.



Ancient artists decorated the walls of the cubiculum by applying paints directly on plaster.

Chloe recounts the events of August 24, AD 79, when Mount Vesuvius, a famous volcano on the Bay of Naples, erupted and unleashed enormous amounts of lethal ash on the villages surrounding it. Romans in the midst of everyday activities were caught off guard by the eruption and buried under layers of ash.

Many deaths and massive destruction accompanied the eruption. However, the ash also created a sort of time capsule by preserving entire cities and the architecture and artwork within them—such as the walls in the cubiculum—for eternity. Chloe tells the group that these paintings date back to 70 BC—over one hundred years before the disaster.



Art from Oceania—islands in the Pacific Ocean—are shown in this gallery.

Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

We leave the cubiculum behind and enter galleries with art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Everything is different in these galleries—the lighting, the sounds, even the smell. We walk under giant wooden boats suspended from the ceiling and pass by elaborate masks of all different shapes, colors, and materials.

Chloe stops and asks us to consider our own ideas of **conventional** beauty. Many objects in this museum were created for specific purposes. Simply looking pretty was not their main objective, yet each is beautiful in its own way. By learning about the **intentions** behind the creation of these objects, Chloe adds, we may feel a stronger connection to both them and their creators.

In one of the African art galleries, a figure of a man stands before me. It looks intimidating, even though it is only about 3.5 feet tall (1.1 m). Chloe identifies this wooden sculpture as an African power figure.

Covered in nails, he's leaning forward in a threatening pose called *akimbo*—hands on his hips. His mouth is open as though he's shouting commands.

Chloe explains that the prominent hole in his stomach was originally filled with plants, feathers, snakeskins, animal teeth, and claws. The materials were believed to give the figure its power.



African power figures were created by special sculptors and ritual leaders working together.

Once the cavity was filled, the figure was considered spiritually activated. The sculpture was then used in ceremonies under the command of a community ritual leader, who would ask spirits for their guidance

in the **mediation** of land disputes, marriages, and treaties. Each time an important agreement was reached, another nail was hammered into the figure's body as a record of its occurrence.

I stop a moment to think about the many different things I've seen in such a short time. I also realize that up until a few hours ago, I would have rather been doing anything but this.

Modern and Contemporary Art

Next, Chloe shows us the Modern and Contemporary Art galleries, which contain art dating from 1900 to the present. We walk through galleries filled with paintings of all sizes. As we pass by, I have trouble figuring out what they're supposed to be. We walk upstairs and stop in front of a large canvas that looks as though a child had a paint-throwing tantrum. Chloe introduces it as a famous work by American artist Jackson Pollock, who helped establish the **abstract expressionism** movement.

She explains that Pollock and other abstract expressionists rejected conventional subject matter and techniques. They worked spontaneously, focusing on gesture and color rather than recognizable images.



A visitor strolls past abstract paintings by Barnett Newman (left) and Mark Rothko (right) in one of the Modern and Contemporary Art galleries.



Jackson Pollock painted *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* in 1950.

Leaving his paintbrush aside, Pollock preferred “action painting.” He poured, splattered, and threw paint on canvases laid on the ground, not perched on a standard artist’s easel. Abstract expressionists broke free of tradition and by doing so changed the future course of art.

In the past, I would never have considered this type of painting art. After listening to Chloe explain Pollock’s inspiration, however, I now have a better understanding. I remember another thing Chloe told us: that pretty landscapes and realistic-looking people are not necessarily what makes good art. Rather, she says, it’s the art’s context, inspiration, and cultural impact. These aspects help us understand art’s significance and help us decide what we think about it.

I’ll have to think about that one, but I feel like I’m starting to get what she means.



The museum's steps are a popular resting spot for visitors.

Conclusion

By now, my legs are getting pretty tired. Chloe leads us past hundreds of European paintings. I catch glimpses of famous works by Van Gogh and Monet before we head down the giant staircase and back to the Great Hall to end the tour. I'm overwhelmed by how much I've just seen and learned. The Met is an awe-inspiring place. It's as if I've traveled around the world and back in time in a one-hour tour. Up until now, I had completely underestimated why art is so important.

As I exit the museum, the sights, sounds, and smells of New York City bombard my senses. I take a break and sit on the great steps in front of the Met. I want to jot down some ideas for my assignment while they're still fresh in my mind. Now comes the real challenge: how will I choose which pieces of art to compare and contrast when they were all so amazing? One thing's for sure: I'll come back, but next time for longer—and for *me*.

Glossary

abstract expressionism (n.)	a style of painting that uses nontraditional means, such as shapes and patterns instead of people or things, to express emotion or attitude (p. 17)
artifacts (n.)	objects made or used by humans long ago (p. 6)
conventional (adj.)	common, traditional, or accepted by most people (p. 15)
facade (n.)	the front, or face, of a building (p. 8)
galleries (n.)	rooms or buildings that house works of art for public display (p. 6)
highlights (n.)	the most memorable, important, or exciting part of an experience or event (p. 5)
intentions (n.)	goals or plans; the purposes or aims of one's actions (p. 15)
intricate (adj.)	very detailed or complicated; complex (p. 9)
mediation (n.)	a process by which differences between people are settled with the help of a neutral third party (p. 16)
replicate (v.)	to reproduce or imitate something exactly (p. 7)
sanctuary (n.)	a safe place; the protection given by such a place (p. 14)
tapestries (n.)	thick pieces of cloth with patterns or scenes woven into them, generally used for display (p. 13)

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Word Count: 2,110

Connections

Writing

Complete the writing assignment given to the student in this book: Write an essay comparing and contrasting three different works of art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Social Studies

Choose and research one artist whose work is displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Write a biography about the artist that focuses on his or her art.



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