

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Looking at Things

Collections can only regain their significance in museums if the actual process of looking can become interesting again. But can it? Today we rarely give anything a second glance. One only has to notice the eyes of someone watching television to see the lack of focus in their stare. It is rather like the difference between the look of an animal in a zoo and the look of an animal in the wild. People in the past looked at each other, and at the world, much more intensely than we tend to do today. The complex and extremely ancient beliefs surrounding the 'evil eye' are but one instance of this. The first covetous glance thrown by someone at the possessions of another was thought to be the most piercing look of all, and many cultures around the globe developed elaborate symbols and procedures to avert its destructive power. Among the peoples of North Africa, for example, the extensive jewellery worn by young brides on their wedding day, and the patchwork jackets worn by soldiers as they rode into battle, both contained within their elaborate patterning, symbolic shapes that were believed to protect their wearers against such envious glances.

Even in the 19th century, people must have looked at things differently from the way we do today. The world was still visually intriguing even to scientists. The question that Darwin tried to answer was: why does nature look the way it does? The word 'species' derives from the Latin *specere*, meaning to look at. Species are, essentially, animals and plants that look alike. Until Darwin, no one really understood why they did. Our glazed looks today do not just stem from the fact that we are now inundated with images; we have also lost much of our sense of wonder at the world. Museums now need to find ways to encourage the visitors who come through their doors to look afresh and questioningly again. One way museums can do this is by bringing what they have sharply into focus. Museums are mainly about learning through looking; they can provide vivid visual experiences that are unlike anything we get from a computer, a book or, most of the time, from everyday life. Not only are visual experiences in museums unimpeded, they are unequivocally three-dimensional. With our bifocal vision, we see three-dimensionally even when we are looking at a work of art as apparently flat as an illuminated manuscript.

The experience of looking at the original Lindisfarne Gospels is much more intense than looking at a modern facsimile version, even if the copy is virtually the same in size and colour. It is a hundred-fold richer experience

te 19th century.

than seeing a virtual version sunk beneath the hazy surface of a computer screen, even if this enables you to turn its pages, as you now can in a new display at the British Library, and will soon be able to on the island of Lindisfarne where the Gospels were originally used. The reason why the experience of seeing the original Lindisfarne Gospels is much more rewarding than looking at any reproduction is because you sense, by doing so, that you are really in touch with the past. And in a way you are, because seeing is a sense, and a form of touching. Looking at a silky smooth colour reproduction or a glowing computer screen, you cannot help but be aware that these are products of our times. The original Lindisfarne Gospels are painted on vellum made from calfskin, soaked, stretched and then scraped clean. Shadows of spines can be seen running across the pages, because no matter how well the skins were pressed, the form of the animal re-asserts itself. Our eyes detect even the slightest changes in surface texture. No reproduction allows you to appreciate the uneven thickness of paint in these Gospels, as the artist starts with his brush full and then tails off when his brush is empty. What is remarkable, looking at the Lindisfarne Gospels in the original, is that you are immediately aware that it is painted by hand on an animal skin. The world in that age seems to breathe around it. You have the sensation that you are looking over the monk's shoulder watching him paint, as you study this great volume in the British Library. Then all the love, care and infinite patience that went into the creation of this Gospel become palpable. This is an unforgettably evocative experience and one you could never have without seeing the original.

#### **Velasquez's *Las Meninas* in the Prado**

**B**efore I actually saw Velasquez's *Las Meninas* of 1656 in the Prado, I had no idea of its scale. In fact the main figures in it are life-size and so lifelike that I felt I was looking not at a picture but through a hole in the wall. It was as though the Infanta, Margarita Teresa, and her aides were just in the next room, breathing and talking. Behind them, in half shadow, stood the painter himself, looking at the canvas and at me – or rather, at the mirror facing him that I had initially read as a hole in the wall. Was I watching the scene through a one-way mirror? Or was I in the room with them, and Velasquez about to add me to the scene? I suddenly had the extraordinary sensation that I was. I had been transported into the painting. This explained its scale. Velasquez's painting had embraced me. The beautiful gentleness of its light, its breadth, its

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clarity and humanity were, for those memorable moments, the air I breathed. No one could experience this sensation, which I am sure Velasquez intended to create, by looking at a reproduction of this picture in a book. Because we see three-dimensionally, the space in which we view things becomes a vital aspect of our experience when viewing exhibits in a museum, even when they are two dimensional.

No reproduction can prepare one for the sight of the treasures of Tutankhamun in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo. The effect of so much gold, as you walk through the galleries, harnessing the light as if it were molten, is irreproducible. On each side of the four-square golden Canopic Shrine stand four small golden goddesses. They have their backs to the outside world and extend their arms to protect the inner shrine from any evil. But they do not touch it. Moreover, each of them turns her face away, as if they dare not even look upon the shrine before them. I know of few more profound images of tender care. And yet, you can only really experience this if you see the object for yourself, in three dimensions. The extraordinary sensation of tenderness is only expressed by the positioning of these goddesses so close to, yet not touching the Shrine. This emotive use of space cannot be sensed in any reproduction or on any screen.

But how can a museum encourage its visitors to look more intensely at less remarkable, though potentially fascinating things? Partly just by putting them into a museum. The artificiality of the museum space legitimises, for example, the presence of a shark in a tank in a gallery, whatever one thinks of it as a work of art. Over the last decade or so, modern art galleries have come increasingly to look like museums run by curators who have lost their marbles. The very existence of museums depends on their right to lift something out of one context and use it in another. The object itself has not changed; it is just that our view of it has. A roughly carved figure of a naked man, with mother-of-pearl eyes and a head of real human hair, pierced all over with three-inch nails driven deep into the splitting wood becomes, in the museum, an example of African art and not, as it might have been originally, a way of inflicting pain and suffering on those you fear or hate. Both views can be true and need not exclude each other. They can indeed enhance each other's meaning. One can look at things in more ways than one.

Aristotle believed that knowledge itself began with seeing. He looked around him at life as it was, not as he was told it ought to be, or as a shadow of divinity. Crucially, he believed that there is nothing in the intellect which is not first experienced by sensation. The physical experience of the world