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Slow art: A return to old-fashioned virtues

Art historian and critic Susan Moore explains her quest for proper ways of looking at art

Slow Art Workshop — SAW — emerged out of fury. On the way to the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht in March, this usually mild-mannered art-critic-cum-saleroom-columnist was seething to learn of [Christie's decision to close its South Kensington operations](#).

South Ken was an Aladdin's cave, a bustling and slightly shabby saleroom offering a wide and eccentric range of works of art and collectibles to those who do not have a fortune to spend. It was the sort of place where you could rummage around and pick things up, or wait patiently at the front counter to ask an expert about something modest that you had brought along. It fostered the next generation of collectors.

It was where I bought my first painting. That still beloved picture cost me £400 — a fortune. I had exceeded what I told myself I could afford. After outbidding my last remaining rival, my heart was thumping so fiercely that I had to go home to lie down, but I was hooked.

Where are twentysomethings to go today to have chance and life-enhancing encounters with works of art they had no idea they would be interested in? (And years of writing profiles of greatest collectors have confirmed that most collections do begin with chance encounters.) In London, Sotheby's has long closed its secondary saleroom at Olympia, Phillips has turned into a boutique auction house, and Bonhams is busy pedalling upmarket.

Across Europe and the US, lower-value lots are increasingly sold online, and dealers are closing unaffordable shops, both grand and humble, at an alarming rate. Access to all sort of works of art has long been diminishing, and along with it the essential expertise which, once lost, is not easily regained.

Perched on a stool at the Tefaf preview, I dashed off a polemic which evidently touched a nerve. When it went up online it was impossible to move more than a few metres without someone wanting to join in the lament about the future for all the myriad works of art around us — and not just those few high-value categories that the major auction houses choose to promote. "We have to be proactive," I declared, and then realised, well, perhaps I had to be.

It seemed that any initiative ought to provide people of any age curious about any kind of art with the opportunity to focus on one or two things, to look, hold (if possible), use their critical faculties and ask questions. I still remember my absolute astonishment when, while I was reviewing an exhibition, the dealer Giuseppe Eskenazi handed me a small Tang dynasty silver cup chased with peony scrolls.

My art historical training had never involved handling anything, more's the pity, and had offered only a few sessions in front of real works of art. Examining that beautiful, tactile little cup, more than 1,000 years old, was revelatory — sheer magic — and as distinct from simply looking at it in a museum vitrine as a reproduction is to the real thing. It turned out



to be the first of many informal master classes.

Little is gained by struggling to look at anything in a crowded exhibition, or by trailing through a gallery, the sight of the next exhibit propelling us ever onward: these are situations in which we spend, apparently, an average of 17 seconds looking at any work of art. Why not slow art, like slow food? Other people have thought of it, and indeed conceived the estimable and now global Slow Art Day (next year, April 14, www.slowartday.com). Nevertheless the acronym of SAW, for the Slow Art Workshops I had in mind, was irresistible.

SAW's aim is to harness the expertise — and the goodwill — of the most passionate and knowledgeable of auction house experts, specialist dealers and museum curators. SAW is a non-profit venture: it is not here to help line anyone's pockets, but to recognise that the art trade is a sometimes overlooked and under-utilised resource.

As academic art history has become increasingly less object-based, museums and the art trade have become the last bastions of connoisseurship and the kind of knowledge that cannot be conveyed by books or lectures. This understanding of and feeling for works of art will only survive if passed on to the next generation. Dealers and salerooms also offer some of the best free shows in town, if the public is brave enough to walk in and see them.

It is not by chance that SAW is launching to coincide with the exhibitions of London Art Week (June 30-July 7), for it seemed sensible to offer workshops alongside a critical mass of events, in galleries and around fairs, auctions and museum shows. The inaugural fair pop-up, at Masterpiece (June 29-July 5), will offer 20-minute sessions on a first-come, first-served basis, each day at 6pm on the stand of brokers JLT Specialty. Objects in focus range from a Chinese scholar's rock to a Lalique pendant.

Hour-long workshops courtesy of dealers and auction houses — encounters with anything from medieval Spanish works of art to paintings by Morandi — launch on June 20 when Professor Osmund Bopearachchi presents Indus Valley material at Oliver Hoare's *Every Object Tells a Story* exhibition.

Museum workshops begin on June 30 when Hugo Chapman and Isabel Seligman of the British Museum reveal how in prints and drawings artists from the Renaissance onwards attempted to regulate and slow down the visual comprehension of their work. Jo Rhymer of the National Gallery invites visitors to immerse themselves in a single painting and be guided towards a deeper connection using mindfulness techniques, as a taster session to an existing programme.

Outside London, Dr Catherine Whistler opens up the Ashmolean Museum print room in Oxford alongside her outstanding Raphael drawings show to stage a workshop on the drawings of Guercino, while Dr Adrian Popescu of the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge was already holding Indian coin handling sessions in association with *Elephants, Deities and Ashoka's Pillar*. Perhaps the most heartening response to my many SAW emails came from that museum's director, Tim Knox: "There is a lot of enthusiasm here at the Fitzwilliam for this project . . . teaching involving the handling of real objects and even connoisseurship is alive and well here in Cambridge!"

It has been humbling to discover the extent and imaginative range of the educational offer in museums and galleries. SAW is a modest initiative but if it ignites a spark of curiosity or gives real pleasure, it will have succeeded, and the beauty of the SAW formula is its simplicity and flexibility. Anyone, anywhere, interested in hosting workshops, participating in SAW or supporting its still developing website, please take a look at slowartworkshop.com, our social media, or contact slowartworkshop@gmail.com