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Response: Pedagogy Round Table

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“A museum label should always encourage the visitor to look at the art work.” Perhaps this sounds like unsurprising advice. But when Jules Prown first said it to me—almost twenty years ago now—it immediately struck me as a quintessential and focused example of his thinking and teaching.

We are all familiar with the problem that Prown is addressing. A curator sits down to write a maximum of seventy words on one of the most important paintings in their institutional collection. But so many things crowd in. So many things need to be said. The artist’s biography, the work’s provenance and condition, the historical and political context in which it was made, the inspiration it provided to later artists: all doubtless important. How does one choose?

For Prown, the answer is clear: only convey information that can be verified by looking, or even better, information that enriches that looking. A museum gallery is not a classroom. Nor is it a book of essays, or a documentary film. It is a place of direct encounter. It is not that he has no regard for biography, provenance, conservation, or social context, of course. He has contributed greatly to the art historical study of all these issues, particularly in the fields of American and British art. But he feels, I think rightly, that when you are fortunate enough to be face to face with a work of art, you should give it your full and undivided attention.

As with most aspects of what has come to be called Prownian methodology, this is a deceptively simple principle with some complex theoretical conviction behind it. Everyone who has come into contact with Prown as a teacher will have been struck by his patience and intensity as a viewer. He asks his students to join him in extended acts of looking. This is not just for pleasure (indeed, given the short attention span of most students, it can be excruciating). He does it because he believes profoundly in the ability of art to deliver meaning from its own internal resources. Rather than validating an art work according to external theory or narratives, projecting on to its surface, he draws on the significance of the art work from within.

Prown is widely associated with the idea of art, and material culture in general, as evidence. This can be misconstrued to imply that he is involved in an elaborate process of pattern recognition, treating works as if they were data points, like Sherlock Holmes trying to build a case. But that is not his intention. There is doubtless an element of sleuthing in his methodology, and he prizes the breakthrough moments in which some aspect of an object or a painting is unlocked for interpretation. Yet these moments always seem more Sigmund Freud than Arthur Conan Doyle. I mean that he never wants to suggest that a work of art has been solved, that it can be fully accounted for as part of a larger scheme. Instead, he views art and objects as depth-charged, and

susceptible to repeated readings from diverse perspectives. In the Prownian method, an art work is put to interpretive use, but it is never used up.

This stance has had a dramatic, and to my mind extremely positive, effect on the generations of art historians who have been touched by Prown's teaching. The imaginative "reading in" that many of his students undertake is licensed, to some degree, by a confidence in art and its ability to absorb and generate numerous, possibly conflicting interpretations. Less obvious, perhaps, is his influence on museum practice. Speaking for myself, I can say that his consistent message to go back to the object has been extremely influential, and remarkably multivalent in its practical implications. But there are some basic principles that are easy enough to follow. While I have written many a museum label in my career, I have gradually come to feel that an exhibition should make perfect sense even to visitors who do not read a single word. And I also think he is correct in that text in a museum should essentially serve to re-engage the eyes of the viewer, and deflect them back to the work. This can be tough for curators who feel they have lots of information to convey, but ultimately, the most generous curatorial act in mounting an exhibition is not to impart information, it is to empower viewers to find their own meanings.

That is a democratic project for museums that goes far beyond labels and text panels. In our day and age, when curating is becoming a populist phenomenon (albeit mostly on social media like Instagram, rather than in galleries), it makes more sense than ever to let the art do the talking. All the more so if you agree with Prown, as I do, that everyday objects such as chairs and teapots are as compelling to interpretation as more obviously legible genres such as painting and sculpture. I have learned many lessons from him, but for my thinking as a curator, ultimately this is the most important: have faith. Encourage people to look, and then let the art perform its magic.