

## HOLIDAY BOOKS

'Art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.' —Walter Pater

# No Photos. Ignore Labels. Just Look

## Seeing Slowly

By Michael Findlay  
Prestel, 247 pages, \$29.95

BY ANDREW BUTTERFIELD

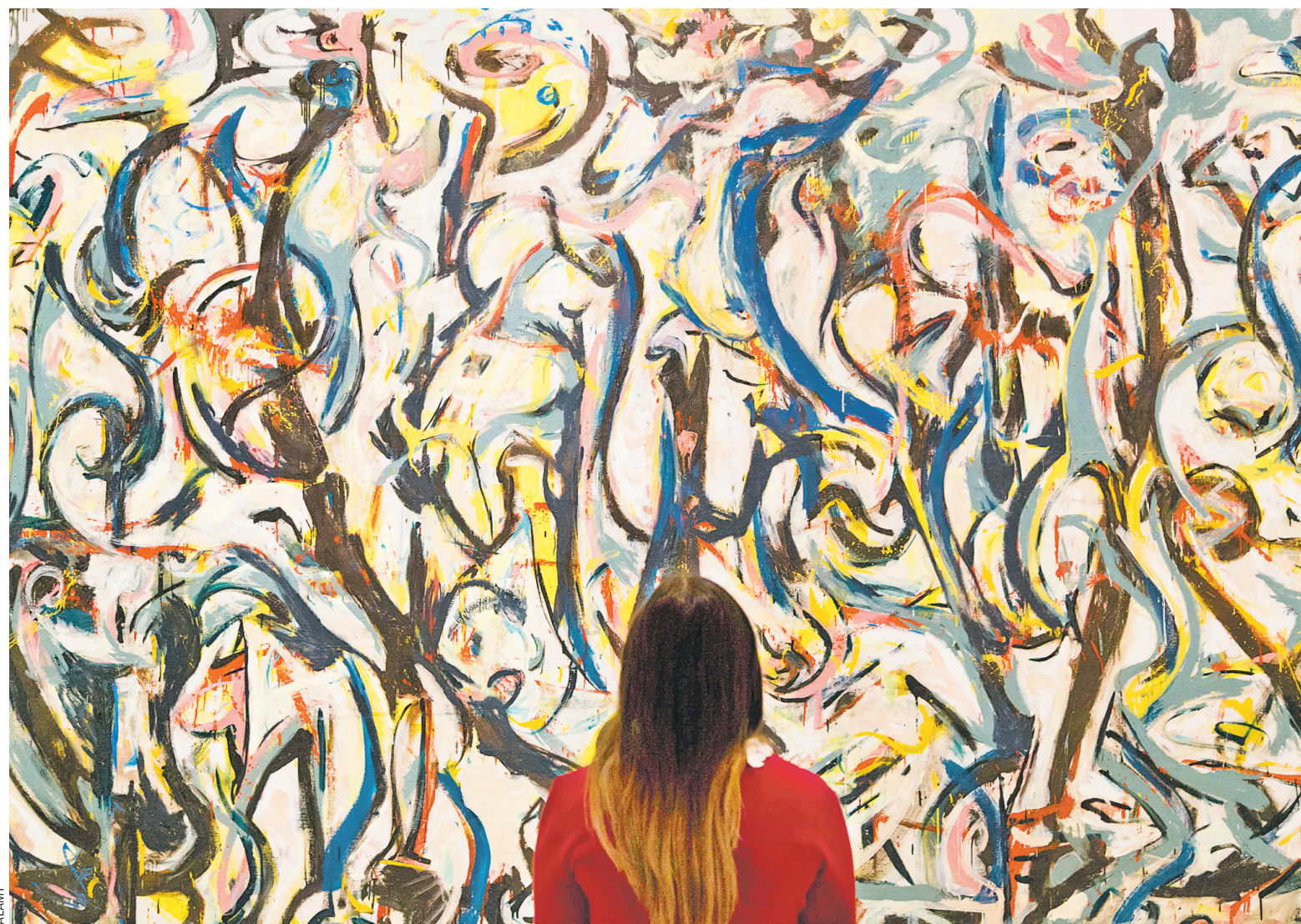
BY NUMERIC measures the art world is thriving as never before. Museum attendance is up—more Americans visit museums in a year than go to all sporting events combined—and the art market is booming. Just 15 years ago to pay \$100 million for a painting or sculpture was unthinkable; now something sells at that level several times a year. This week a Leonardo sold for \$450 million.

Yet ask any collector, dealer or curator who measures the health of the art world by something other than just dollars and crowds, and you are likely to get a worried response. The sheer scale of activity is transforming museums and the market and driving out the fundamental pleasures of looking, thinking and feeling that draw us to art in the first place. At the Vatican and the Louvre, crowds are so large that entire rooms become impassable; other popular institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art also have worsening problems of crowd control, even as they continue to expand. Few in the crush and noise can pause to consider what they are seeing.

According to multiple studies, museum-goers usually spend only about 10 seconds on any work they look at—and that time includes reading the wall label. In museums where photography is permitted, some visitors pass more time taking selfies with their backs to the pictures than they do actually looking at the works. Like fast food, art is becoming a product for rapid mass consumption.

To counter this change, some have started initiatives to nurture a calmer approach to viewing art. Slow Art Day, an international movement, encourages lengthy study of art in museums and galleries; at Harvard the art historian Jennifer Roberts trains her students in the practice of immersive attention, whereby they look at one work for three hours. Recent books in praise of contemplative experience include "On Slowness," "Slow Cinema," "Slow Reading," "Slow Movies" and earlier this year, "Slow Art."

Michael Findlay's "Seeing Slowly: Looking at Modern Art" is a fresh and lively new book on the subject that offers a short but penetrating analysis of the problem, as well as a practical guide to the steps a visitor to a museum or gallery can take to see with greater understanding and pleasure. Written by an eminent dealer of modern art with more than 50 years of experience, it offers an insider's view from someone who can remember what museums were like before they became a branch of the tourism industry, and what the art market was like before it became so fixated on cash



AN ALL-OVER EXPERIENCE A woman looks at 'Mural' (1943) by Jackson Pollock at an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts last year.

and fame. Although Mr. Findlay is apt to quote from a wide range of literary sources, including Wordsworth and William James, the tone of the writing is informal and casual; this is a deeply personal book, full of autobiographical details revealed with unabashed candor. Discussing his response to pictures he tells a surprising amount about his wife, family and friends, and he is unafraid to admit that great works of art still have the power to bring tears to his eyes.

In Mr. Findlay's assessment art is fundamentally sensory, experiential and emotional, but nearly every sector of the art world tries to change art into something else. With more melancholy than anger, he describes how museums grew obsessed with marketing efforts in order to increase attendance, and how the press came to focus almost exclusively on money when reporting on the art trade. He recalls a time, not so long ago, when collecting was mainly for passionate enthusiasts, whereas now many buyers merely seek trophies to flash their wealth and impress their friends. The author also criticizes academia's desire to reduce art to little more than an illustration of history. Approvingly, he quotes the great 19th-century connoisseur Giovanni Morelli, who wrote, "the history of art can only be studied properly before the works themselves. Books are apt to warp a man's judgment."

Mr. Findlay recognizes that, from the beginning, art has often served as a token of power, and that its study can tell us much about the past and present. But these are secondary values; its primary function is to be experienced. He does not say so, but his

fears. Throughout the book he advises his readers to "pay no attention to either popularity or price" and to ignore the opinions of others, especially critics and gallerists. Instead viewers should look, think, feel and judge for themselves. Near the begin-

ning of art. "You can only be 'wrong,'" he says, "if you let the opinion of others trump the conclusions, albeit highly subjective, that you reach as result of your own careful and genuine engagement with works of art." Given the anxious conformity of so many in the art world, this is particularly refreshing advice.

Mr. Findlay preaches two insights. The first is that understanding is made of experience, not just information. Facts gained from books, and works seen in reproduction are nothing more than information. Only the living acquaintance with art in its original form can stimulate your senses and thereby engage your emotions and open your mind. Real knowledge and secure judgment come from a lot of looking, and nothing else. The second is that "our emotions are forms of cognition." He writes, "We do not need to know about the painting. We do not need to identify the painting." What we need is to experience the painting "with an affect that is sensuous, i.e., it produces a sensation, an altered state of mind, possibly a visceral feeling." This can only be done slowly and calmly. Quoting T.S. Eliot, Mr. Findlay tells us that when viewed this way, art can transport us to "the still point of the turning world."

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A surprising number of collectors and even dealers feel they lack understanding and fear making judgments. No wonder the art world is full of anxious conformity.

view of art is humanistic, not hedonistic, and ultimately goes back to Aristotle. What he does tell us is that he was raised Catholic and educated by Jesuits, and he clearly retains the sense that art has an almost spiritual communicative power. Art is sensual but should also stir the emotions and provoke inspiration.

Mr. Findlay used to teach a course called "Trusting Your Eye" and a stated purpose of his book is "to inspire confidence in your own taste." A surprising number of participants in the art world, from first-time museum visitors to seasoned collectors and dealers, have an uneasy feeling that they lack understanding, and that this is a sign of their lesser status compared to those more in the know. Mr. Findlay wants to do away with such

ning of the book he writes, "When a voice of authority interprets a work of art, we need the courage to tell ourselves it is merely a suggestion, and that the only truth is in what we see." Near the end, he makes a similar recommendation. "Forget what your spouse (or friend) thinks, and forget art history... just decide for yourself."

To achieve confident judgment, he counsels that in a museum or gallery you ignore every distraction from visual experience. Don't get the audioguide, don't download the app, don't read the wall label, don't snap a photo. Just look. The more you look, the more you will know what it is you like, and the more sure you will become in your own taste. There is no universal right answer; inevitably we all respond differently to the

a court favorite of Alessandro Medici. When Vasari was awarded a desirable commission from Medici, many of the other Florentine artists around him became intensely jealous. "The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art" (Norton, 397 pages, \$29.95), by Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney, is a biography of the biographer that's also a bouncy summary of his masterly book.

A big coffee-table art book that gives you an intense case of the wants isn't a bad thing if it's a desirable object in its own right and there's a lot to learn from it. "Design in California and Mexico, 1915-1985" (Prestel, 358 pages, \$65), edited by Wendy Kaplan, is a catalog of beautiful man-made things—outside the fine arts—produced in our most populous state and neighboring country during the heart of the previous century. The architecture ranges from revivals of pre-Hispanic and Spanish Colonial styles to great and simple modernist buildings that look like Mies van der Rohe flooded with constant sunshine. Ceramics, furniture and textiles are likewise varied and stunning. My favorites are the exuberant travel posters—some of which are still obtainable at non-Sotheby's prices.

My father, a midlevel advertising jack-of-all-trades, instilled in me a fondness for fonts and their odd-sounding titles—Griffo's Italic, Bremer Antiqua, Patrona Grotesk—as

good as rock-band names if not actual poetry in themselves. The visual styles of typography to which they refer are even better. In Paul McNeil's "The Visual History of Type" (Laurence King, 672 pages, \$85) more than 320 faces, from the mid-1400s to today, are displayed in their initial design and early printings. Some have veritable biographies: "Although hugely popular in the early part of the 20th century," Mr. McNeil writes, "Venus did not survive the technological transitions to machine composition, phototyping or the digital era." Who knew that the fate of a font could be poignant or, for that matter, that type fonts could look so original?

Originality as an artistic virtue is cheerfully debunked in Robert Shore's "Beg, Steal & Borrow: Artists Against Originality" (Laurence King, 192 pages, \$19.99). Although the main culprits—Picasso, Duchamp, Warhol and Jeff Koons—are obvious to nearly everyone, Mr. Shore observes that "for every iteration there's a seemingly infinite number of modified reiterations—successful memes spreading from brain to brain (and, in the case of internet memes, from computer to computer) propagating themselves through a process of continuous mutation and blending." That's either joyfully liberating or terribly depressing. As is the holiday season itself.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

## WHAT TO GIVE

THE ENGLISH painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) had what could be called a poignant later life. Of sour disposition and given to controversy, Turner in his last years endured a failed gallery and ill health. Even so, he left behind several thousand oil paintings and 10 times that number of drawings and sketches. The best works of this artist, one of the first great modernists, appear in "Turner's Modern and Ancient Ports: Passage Through Time" (Yale, 163 pages, \$45), with essays by Susan Grace Galassi and others. The anchor here are two paintings purchased by Henry Clay Frick, "The Harbor of Dieppe" (1825) and "Cologne, the Arrival of a Packet-Boat: Evening" (1826), which display Turner's poetically unorthodox paint handling and mark a turning point in his traversal from naturalism to semiabstraction. They're light, bright, awash in yellow hues—and beautiful. Other paintings buttress the featured duo, and lots of drawings and small watercolors lend insight into how the artist worked and thought.

Beauty in the paintings of Alice Neel (1900-1984) is considerably less obvious, but for those who appreciate the deliberately awkward in modern art, her work is both aesthetically and humanely powerful. Neel—who first lived in Greenwich Village (she was described by her FBI surveillants as

a "romantic Bohemian type Communist")—moved to Harlem in 1938 and remained there for decades. A figurative painter who specialized in portraits of friends and neighbors,



she once said, "Whether I'm painting or not, I have this overweening interest in humanity. Even if I'm not working, I'm still analyzing people." "Alice Neel: Uptown" (David Zwirner, 144 pages, \$55), by Hilton Als, captures Neel, in her own peculiar El Greco-esque style, capturing the psychological essence of her sitters.

Neel was a white artist often painting black subjects, but the 170

works in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" (Tate, 256 pages, \$39.95), edited by Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, were almost all made by black artists between the 1963 March on Washington and the 1980s. They range from the abstractions of Norman Lewis and Howardena Pindell through the academic realism of Charles White and the narrative collages of Romare Bearden to the sophisticated political symbolism of Melvin Edwards and David Hammons. This book is no record of harmony among artists. For example, Alvin Loving, the first black artist to enjoy a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum, was castigated by his racial confreres for employing abstraction, an ostensibly "white" style—reminding us that vigorous artistic progress never comes from unanimity.

In fact, rampant personal ambition and ruthless competition has been the order of the day since the Renaissance, when artists emerged out of the relative anonymity of the Medieval guilds. Giorgio Vasari (1511-74) was a painter and writer who described the artists and his time in "The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects," a book many consider to be the founding document of art history. Vasari, who knew and revered Michelangelo, also wrote about other masters, from Giotto to Leonardo da Vinci, and was no mean painter himself. While still in his 20s, he became