

# A Moment in the Light

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“**G**et ready,” I muse. “Brace yourself.” Soon I will plunge myself into a time warp. No wonder I seek escape. The noise, the dirt, the underlying sense of danger in this city are too much to handle today. I have the exact destination in mind for my sanctuary. Sadly, my escape route includes riding the Lexington Street subway to 68th street. Here, swaying as I cling to a grimy metal handrail for the standing-room only passengers, I am fully in the ‘now’ of modern-day New York City. Packed tightly around me are people of all races, shapes, and sizes. We ignore each other, disconnected. Enshrouded in the dim, dank crowded subway car, plastered with ads that are visual shrieks, I strive to isolate myself from my fellow humanity. My Ipod hums in my ears, I click out a text message on my Motorola cell phone, and re-position my air-pump Nike sneakers to give me balance. The train’s forward momentum shoots like an arrow and then crashes into a bull’s eye. We’ve hit my stop. Getting off the subway and into the city sunlight is always somewhat of an emotional relief, and the Frick Museum, the ultimate relief.

I turn a corner and climb the five gracious stone steps to enter the distinguished Frick, a nineteenth century art connoisseur’s home. Already I can feel my muscles start to relax. As soon as I am inside the regal mahogany entry hall, I instantaneously vanish from the world of ‘now’ and reappear in the universe of ‘then.’ The forces of the past enfold me. In this intimate and highly personal setting, I am not so much a museum-goer as an invited guest, co-habiting with ghosts now very much alive in this antique sanctuary. Within this once-lived-in home, my feelings constantly fluctuate. Passing under imposingly intricate archways in the house, I feel both elegant and grand yet somehow also small and insignificant. Certain rooms are radiant with sun, softened by skylights floating above harmoniously arranged artworks. Yet other rooms, such as the oppressively ornate Living Hall, seem to suppress all creativity. The cluttered European furniture, collectibles and imposing paintings in massive gilt frames reinforce past grandeur and pretentiousness. The room is over-weighted by artwork, laden with heavy curtains that block light

from the outside world. Too many patterns in silk and velvet clash in this gloomy space stuck in time. I look for cobwebs, for dust balls, for proof of time passing, always finding none.

In this time warp, I'm standing on unchanged ground in a city where change is constant. Change is the controlling force outside these walls. Yet inside, the Frick home exists as an illusion of space that is unchanging. Perhaps this is why I feel so at ease here. Andre Aciman, in his essay "Shadow Cities," describes the way he "hates change...it reminds me of the thing I fear most: that my feet are never solidly on the ground, but also that soil under me is equally weak" (471). The Frick's 'soil' remains eerily sturdy. I round the corner to the Garden Court, a serene atrium with a long rectangular reflecting pool. Grand skylights highlight the majestic fountain and the Classical statuettes partly hidden by ferns. It is the ideal place for quiet contemplation. The trickling of the fountain water serves as a metronome, reminding me of time passing. Yet then the splashing alternates into a hypnotic humming, eliminating my sense of time. Time inevitably means change, yet within the Frick, we experience the paradox of timeliness and timelessness. The Frick exists as a historical landmark, a space purposely designed and built to outwit mortality and beckon eternity. Gazing into the unrippled reflecting pond, I can't help but think: is this resistance to change unnatural or immoral?

Time resonates strangely in this museum. Inanimate becomes animate. In the multitude of glass display cabinets, the blue and white porcelain sits politely, waiting to be used. The elaborately set table in the Living Hall patiently hopes to host a meal. Inspired, I imagine dinner parties past, the clink of crystal, the click of silver on fine china plates, low conversation and a string quartet. Oddly, I mourn most for the china that will never be used again.

As I step from the dining room into the long mahogany hallway, brilliant light emanates from a painting at the farthest reach of the museum's galleries. This is the reason I've come. The light draws me to it, captivating me and every Frick visitor who glances down the corridor. We are pulled forward, unswerving, to Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*, the most seductive oil painting I've ever seen, its seductiveness less sensual than controlling. The viewer must confront the painting. Vermeer has designed this scene to catalyze our imagination, using light to capture us. On one level, like most of Vermeer's work, puritanical order and quiet harmony rule in this domestic scene of a young noblewoman receiving a letter from her maid.

The backdrop is a display of order, wealth, and stability. The mistress's table, covered with expensive blue velvet, is set with a silver tea service on an

extravagant silver tray. On the far side of the table is a large stationery box with silver handles. This young woman is wrapped in a lavish golden dress, trimmed in white fur. Large pearl earrings dangle against her exposed neck, catching the light. A pearl headdress is woven into her tightly pinned hair. The mistress's profile turns slightly away from us as she meets the gaze of her concerned maid, who extends the delivered letter. The maid, in her drab smock, almost blends into the plain, brown background. Yet despite the obvious contrast of class and wealth, these two women seem intimately connected. Their eyes are locked in a knowing glance, and perhaps it is the shared knowledge of this private and perhaps illicit letter, that binds them.

This exchange of the letter thrusts the viewer into a moment of mysterious crisis and tension. Clearly, the young mistress is approached with unexpected news. Vermeer literally makes this surprise letter her moment in the spotlight through his use of paint. Through a window we cannot see, Vermeer suffuses "painted light" to create an aura around the letter and the women. The carefully constructed order in the picture is about to be shattered by this news, as the mistress clearly faces a pivotal decision.

In one hand, the mistress tensely holds her pen above her half written correspondence, interrupted by the delivery of this letter. Her other hand is raised to her chin, and although we cannot fully see her face, Vermeer hints at an expression of worried surprise. As Lawrence Weschler puts it, "Vermeer deploys the conventional iconography precisely as to upend it" (326). Though I come to the Frick Museum for the sense of order and stability it offers me, ironically what I love best is this painting that captures a moment in which all order is on the verge of being shattered. What is it that I find so endearing in this elusive moment that portends monumental change?

I turn from the painting, perplexed. I now face the rest of the mansion, which has stood nobly for more than one hundred years. Like Aciman's beloved Strauss Park, the Frick is an oasis from the chaotic 'now,' a place "for contemplation, for restoration—in both its meanings—for retrospection, for finding oneself, for finding the center of things" (473). As does Aciman, I feel that I am having an experience much greater than aesthetic appreciation of artwork and space. This moment has spiritual relevance. The museum itself is very much alive. As writer Roland Barthes would say, the Frick house space "animates me and I animate it...this is what creates every adventure" (409). Within the majestic Frick home, involuntarily, I glide instead of walk, and whisper instead of talk. I am immersed in the past. Subconsciously, I imagine it and study it, until I find myself mimicking it. History hovers over all of us at the Frick, not as a weight, but as an inspiration to pull us up and out of our-

selves. The past becomes our present, and in this way the space empowers us to feel calm and restored. I am unconsciously role playing, participating in something that cannot change. It is past, it is done, it is permanent. The museum is suspended in a time warp, mirroring the suspended animation in Vermeer's dramatic masterpiece. Somehow at the Frick, fleeting moments become eternal.

On one level, all museums preserve the past through their displays of artwork and antiquities. At the Frick, however, there is an intimacy with the past that is lacking in other museums I know well. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art I feel the pressure to analyze each artwork, coupled with the responsibility to admire each piece equally. Of course, in a day's visit this remains an impossibility in such a massive structure. The scale is so inhuman that I'm doomed to failure. Beyond sheer scale is the impersonality of the space, similar to so many large museums that showcase art and sublimate the space. The museum is negative space, so it fails to animate me. The walls, in effect, are clean canvases upon which great artistic works meticulously reside. The museum becomes like the color white; the point is not to exist itself, but to ensure through contrast the unique existence of all other colors. The museum space is indiscernible, dead.

In contrast, at the small-scale Frick, the museum itself and its artwork speak for themselves, jump out at us, radiantly alive, and often shout and jostle for our attention. Indeed, every artwork can receive our attention in a museum tour here, since the scale is most decidedly human and intimate. I stroll past a Bronzino, then a Constable. These paintings, different genres, different eras, exist exuberantly side by side. Next, I see twin Italian Renaissance statuettes atop a neoclassical French side table, above which hangs a portrait by El Greco. This museum wall is an eclectic and incomparable arrangement that could never exist at the Met. In fact, in most museums, walls have been constructed to ensure the separation and definition of these objects. At the Met or MoMA, we view the Impressionists together, Degas dancers in a row, a room solely of Chinese ceramics. There is no untoward interaction, no dynamic animation.

What sets the Frick apart is simply this: it was a home first and a gallery second. This makes the experience wholly different. I know that these paintings and objects knew people. They existed in a home; they watched over a family; the paintings in the Frick have a deeper, more intimate history. This art is wise, wise because instead of facing museum visitors, it witnessed everyday life. Artwork was arranged not by era, genre, artist, or region, but by the idiosyncrasies of one man.

Somehow at the Frick, my museum visit becomes less intellectual and more emotional. I find myself in what Barthes defines as *studium*, “a kind of education which allows me to discover the *operator*, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them ‘in reverse,’ according to my will as *spectator*” (415). Within the setting of a museum, we are clearly the *spectators*. However, who, exactly, is the *operator*? I turn into the Living Room and gaze at the portrait in front of me. It is of Henry Clay Frick (1849 - 1919).

The stunning diversity of the Frick galleries accumulates to form an insight into the mind of an individual man. Aciman describes how he “could never understand or appreciate New York unless [he] could make it a mirror” (478). At first, I looked at these paintings one by one. Now I realize they are part of something much greater—literally the building blocks of a man’s life, mirroring his time, his taste. Behind the artwork, the walls of the Frick are not bland and invisible like most museum walls. Rather, they are covered in bookshelves, distinctive turn-of-the-century wallpaper, curtains, and fixtures. By securing the artwork in permanence in his beloved house, set against the same backdrop of his deepest memories, perhaps he is asking us not to forget him, the collector. Suddenly, it becomes apparent why Frick’s collection remains in his Fifth Avenue mansion.

I stare at Mr. Frick’s portrait as I contemplate Aciman’s anxiety of impermanence. Aciman describes how he wanted “to rescue things everywhere, as though by restoring them here [he] might restore them elsewhere as well” (470). New York City and the world were convulsed by change toward the end of Frick’s life. By creating a museum in his home, Frick strove for permanence while surrounded by tumult and uncertainty. His collection became his own sanctuary of familiar and deeply loved artwork. As to the objective of immersing oneself in a space, Susan Sontag writes, “Why enter? Only to play. A game of recognitions” (4). Herein lies the spiritual element of the Frick. Behind the paintings and beneath the statues, I am coming to recognize the passion of a collector.

Perhaps through his collection, Mr. Frick is asking us to acknowledge and understand him. A ruthless industrialist from Pennsylvania, he became a millionaire at the age of thirty in the steel industry. In his drive to modernize the steel business and his cutthroat-brand of industrialism, Frick made many enemies. He survived an assassination attempt in a labor riot. Yet this industrial legacy is in stark contrast to his aesthetic sensibility. I see peaceful landscapes, tranquil portraits, a virtual absence of violence and strife. In his home, he attempted to achieve artistic harmony. Was this an attempt at redemption

through art? Paradoxically, his passion for modernization in the American business world is upended in his collector's passion for Old Masters, classic statuary, and European antiques. In his art collection, he strives for stability and permanence.

Clearly, Mr. Frick experienced a sense of ambivalence throughout his life. Through the art of collecting, in every piece of artwork and how it is positioned, Mr. Frick is trying to define himself. This is what ultimately sets the space of the Frick apart from most museums. We do not enter to admire and learn, but to recognize another individual, and through this acquaintance, to recognize ourselves. At the Frick, all cultures, periods, and classifications gracefully blur into a personal style, creating an aura of intimacy so profound that we instantly feel, as Aciman does in Strauss Park, surrounded by "layers upon layers of histories, warmed-over memories" (481). As I gaze at Frick's walls, the artwork expressing a collector's passion, I realize the space animates me because it is a place "for finding oneself, for finding the center of things" (Aciman 473). In truth, the only way to define who we are is by comparing and contrasting ourselves to the world around us. Mr. Frick, in a time of abundant uncertainty and transience, left us his collection in pristine permanence—a monument suspended in the past, a place that we may enter when the warp-speed change of present day New York City is too much to handle.

The Frick remains an oasis because of this time warp. Despite the vast chasm of age, wealth, and era, Mr. Frick and I casually meet in an act of *studium*: "a very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like/I don't like" (414). As a visitor I not only take refuge in the unchanged past, but in the delight of connecting through another person by comparing our tastes. Aciman states that "in the end it's the comparing we like, not the objects we compare" (478). He reminds us: "Outside of comparing we cannot feel" (478). The space of the Frick museum has the ability to animate me because by exploring the house, I am encountering an individual and coming to terms with an era. By understanding Mr. Frick, I discover I am better understanding myself.

Mr. Frick has attempted to express and preserve his identity through his collection. While we understand his attempt to capture the past and project his vision into the future, there is glaring anomaly. He deeply understood the power of the transient. This is displayed most acutely in Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*, Mr. Frick's coveted last acquisition. Here, within a tranquil house, as opulent as the Frick mansion itself, a young woman has just received news. We cannot know what news; we know only that it will affect her life in a fundamentally important way. Mr. Frick must have appreciated this suspended

moment as simultaneously beautiful and stressful. Above all else, it is fleeting. The letter will be opened, a decision will be made, lives will be changed. The sun will inevitably set, and Vermeer's light will pass. In viewing this painting, I understand I've been pierced by what Barthes calls *punctum*, "the second element that will break the *studium*" (413). Barthes further defines *punctum* as "the cast of the dice" (414). Here, the dice are up in the air; the consequence of this simple letter somehow becomes dangerous and alluring. Like Mr. Frick, I too am mesmerized by this painting. It forces me to ponder the power of these pivotal moments that can dictate the course of our lives. I reflect on moments past when I was encircled in Vermeer's transient light, opening a college application, waiting for a crucial phone call, listening to the doctor begin his diagnosis. Odd, how the painting I have come to appreciate most in the Frick represents tension, transience, uncertainty, and change—the exact qualities which I entered the space seeking to escape.

Sontag writes that "ordinary life is ridiculous, if you take some distance from it. Anything can turn into anything else, anything can be dangerous, anything can collapse, give way" (248). In our time warp, past and present now fuse. Mr. Frick and I are no longer comparing our tastes across our cultural chasm; we're connected by a universal human ambivalence. Although I embrace the permanence of Mr. Frick's legacy, Vermeer's depiction of tension and transience ultimately undermines this relief and pierces me with *punctum*. Perhaps, the lesson is the acceptance and appreciation of both permanence and transience. I step out of the 'then' onto the chilly New York sidewalk, hook myself up to my Ipod and traverse back into the 'now.' I pull my cell phone out of my purse. It blinks. "One new message."

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