

Meditation and Art- Posted January 5, 2011 on "The Meditative Life," a blog for *Psychology Today*.

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When invited by one of Amherst College's curators to lead an exercise for Meditations at the Mead Art Museum, I selected Arey Scheffer's large 1856 painting of Paolo and Francesca. The illicit love these two had for one another placed them in Dante's swirling second circle of the Inferno. From the shadows on the right of the painting, Virgil and Dante pensively observe the torments of the couple's eternal loveless embrace.



Arey Scheffer, Paolo and Francesca © Mead Art Museum, Amherst College

Source: Amherst College, Mead Art Museum

Contemplative engagement with a work of art can, quite literally, help bring it to life. In our conversation after the meditation on Scheffer's painting, one of the participants remarked that it was as if the painting had been asleep, and through the meditation it woke up - came alive. Her experience was not unlike Rilke's as he repeatedly went to view the paintings of Cézanne while in Paris in 1907. Again and again Rilke returned to the gallery where Cézanne's paintings hung. On October 10 he could finally write, "for a long time nothing, and suddenly one has the right eyes." The paintings that had been so enigmatic and elusive came to life, so that Rilke could breathe in their beauty and truth. He finally, after long attentive

looking, had the eyes to see them. The German poet Goethe fully understood the significance of such attentive contemplation and its formative force writing, "Every object, well-contemplated, opens a new organ in us."

I invite you to settle yourself before the painting, as I invited those with me at the Mead Art Museum on that autumn evening. Settle not only your body, but also your mind, letting go of tensions, thoughts, worries, and all distractions. You may find that you are helped in this by closing your eyes and attending to your breath. With each out-breath relax further. Once settled, open your eyes and rest them gently on the painting, first noting without thinking, some of the myriad details of the painting: a dark background, paired figures, eyes are closed or averted, hair and drapery flowing, wounds, tears. Two upright bystanders stand on the right, one capped in red the other with leaves of laurel...

After a time, soften and widen your gaze so that instead of individual particulars you see the *relationships* within the painting: light and dark, movement and stillness, diagonal and vertical, anguish and objectivity... Each of these polarities animates the canvas. As we become increasingly aware of them and strive to hold them all simultaneously in our gaze, then does the painting indeed awaken, come alive. We hear the winds while sensing the stillness, we feel the anguish and the yet we also stand apart like Dante and Virgil. When our contemplative engagement with the painting is at its peak, we gently close our eyes, remaining alert and inwardly open. The memory image of the painting gradually fades from view, but its movement, emotion, stillness and force reverberate in us still. We allow ourselves to enter into and dwell in these inner experiences that take us beyond image to activity, energy, life. They were in the painting, "asleep", waiting for the awakening gaze of the viewer who suddenly has the right eyes.

Emerson must have had something similar in mind when he wrote, "We animate what we can, and only see what we animate." Contemplative beholding of art - indeed of anything - can lead to the animation of whatever is before us. New eyes, "the right eyes," suddenly open, waking us up, and consequently awakening everything around us.