

The Powerful Art of Travel

Heather Heckel

Editor's Note: Heather Heckel shares how her celebratory travel abroad provided opportunities to experience art's ability to inspire, unite, and offer refuge — a message she wishes to pass on to her colleagues and students.

They say life begins at 40. This past summer for my milestone birthday I gave myself the gift of a month of traveling across Europe since I had never been before. This is reminiscent of the *Grand Tour* that began during the Renaissance, a time of rebirth, which included educating oneself by traveling through Europe with Italy as the final destination. My itinerary included England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Italy, and I educated myself by getting to know various cities on foot and visiting numerous museums. As an artist and art educator I have always appreciated art history, and I share that interest with my middle school students by exposing them to historical artists and art movements with every project. I often find myself turning to the comfort of familiar images during times of stress.

Unfortunately, we are living in emotional and divisive times in our country, and it is taxing to try to process the chaos that we are bombarded with on a seemingly daily basis. On my trip I viewed historical and contemporary artworks through the lens of self-reflection that comes with starting a new decade in my life, and my passion for art exploration as a way to foster hope, resilience, and optimism, during these tumultuous times. The life lessons that I learned on my version of a Grand Tour are good reminders for myself and my colleagues, as well as teachable moments for my students.

Look Twice, Not All Is What It Seems

While in London I visited an installation, *The Bourbon Street Chippy*, by contemporary artist Lucy Sparrow. She calls herself a “feltist” and sews everyday objects out of felt, and the result is a playful world of plush objects mimicking everyday objects. I visited a Chippy Shop where customers normally get fish and chips to go. The



photos on the wall, advertisements on the bulletin board, the fish, chips, condiments, and drinks were all hand-sewn using felt and stuffed with filling. In a world of artificial intelligence and scammers who are trying to deceive us it is important to confirm the authenticity of things, and of course to continue to make meaningful artwork ourselves, by hand. I have found that the repetitive movements of sewing, the tactile focus required to assemble a piece of artwork with fabric and thread, and the absence of a screen has an incredible calming effect on myself and my students.

Try to See The Big Picture. Or The Devil Is In The Details



While in London I also saw the solo exhibit, *Jenny Saville: The Anatomy of Painting*, at the National Portrait Gallery. Her pieces are made to see in person since they are so large — you can view them from across the gallery to see the full figure, and up close to see all the smaller colors, textures,

and shapes (elements of design!) that comprise them. A portrait by her is like a headline, and seeing all the small steps and details that go into constructing a finished work is like reading the whole story. I was reminded that when things feel overwhelming, we can take a breath and zoom out to get perspective and find clarity in a larger context.

No One Is Perfect

While in Paris I saw Alexandros of Antioch's marble sculpture *Venus de Milo* created approximately two thousand years ago. Even though her arms have never been recovered we have learned to know her in her current, incomplete form. We could argue that she is more beautiful and intriguing because of what is missing. It makes me think of Bob Ross' *Happy Accidents*,



or Barney Saltzberg's *Beautiful Oops!* I teach my students that mistakes are part of the creative process, and part of being human. Embracing failures and learning from them can lead to a better outcome. We can celebrate our differences and accept each other, flaws and all.

There Is More Than One Right Answer

While in Florence I saw two versions of *David*, the 1440's bronze statue by Donatello and the 1550's marble sculpture by Michelangelo. Although both artists depicted the same biblical figure, the differences are numerous: medium, color, size, atmosphere, and presentation. Donatello and Michelangelo were referencing the same



person, but interpreted him in markedly different ways, and as a viewer I found them to be both equally awe-inspiring. In fact, seeing both sculptures gave me a deeper understanding of the story. It reminded me that art provides infinite interpretations, and the way something is presented can influence our feelings and opinions of it. Someone can read or hear the same story and interpret it differently. I give my students parameters for each project but am endlessly fascinated to see how different their results are. Perhaps the "right answer" is absorbing different viewpoints for a deeper understanding of a topic.

Stay Calm

While in Paris I saw DaVinci's early 1500's oil painting *Mona Lisa*. I waited for over an hour in her packed gallery to get an unobstructed view, and to take a selfie with her of course. I was struck by how small the painting was, especially since her presence is so far reaching that she seems larger than life, like a celebrity. I also appreciated her serene expression.



Despite the clamoring around her she was a quiet and steady presence, like a stationary rock in a raging river. It was a lesson in finding inner peace despite the bodily chaos of fellow visitors or the mental chaos of current events. If things feel stressful, take a deep breath and try to invoke our friend Mona Lisa.

My summer travels this year were varied site-specific experiences featuring different languages, food, climates, and cultures, but I found the common thread to be my enjoyment of witnessing others viewing artworks as part of a collective

audience. We seem to be focusing on our differences as a nation lately, but this was a unifying moment because it was a shared experience with strangers from all over the world who were paying attention to the same thing. It is easy to become irritated by crowds of people and long lines, but in this case, I was thrilled to see the outpouring of visitors who were interested in seeing works of art in person. Famous artworks and artists pull people in, and visitors are still excited about something tangible in the real world despite living in a digital era. These tenets are ways of thinking that result from an art education and are often reasons that we use to justify our subject and careers, such as the importance of creativity and critical thinking skills. So, the next time we feel overwhelmed, let us turn to art to uplift and remind us to stay positive, look for the lesson, and remember why we teach art. One of my passions as an art educator is to demonstrate how art has the ability to inspire the curiosity of self-reflection and the passion for lifelong learning, and how the power of both viewing and creating art can serve as a haven of rest in the frenzy of everyday life.



Dr. Heather Heckel, EdD is an artist/art educator living in New York City and teaching on Long Island. Her award-winning artwork has been shown internationally, is in several national permanent collections, and is featured regularly in the Park Slope Reader. She is

a lifelong learner who loves to travel and has been awarded 29 artist residencies through the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management. She is in her 13th year of teaching public school art and has taught at the college and middle/high school levels. She earned her BFA in Illustration from the Ringling College of Art and Design, her MAT in Art Education from the School of Visual Arts, her MFA in Painting from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and her EdD in Educational Leadership from the University of the Cumberland. Her research investigated the relationships between art education, leadership, and creativity. She lives with her two dozen houseplants and loves going to the movies and trying new vegan restaurants.

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