

So many paintings, so little time

SIMON CLEMENTS

Julian Porter, Q.C., *149 Paintings You Really Need to See in Europe (So You Can Ignore the Others)*

(Toronto: Dundurn, 2013)

Julian Porter set himself an imposing task: to capture in a readable and useful format a lifetime's worth of looking at pictures, and to convey to the reader both the joy that has brought to him and insights that might be useful to others. He succeeds on both counts.

I know Julian Porter as the leader of the defamation bar (indeed, one of my early trials was a defamation case with Julian on the other side – thrilling and nerve-wracking). I did not know that he is passionate about European painting. In fact, after reading his account of a life spent looking at art, I think there is a possibility that these pictures, not the law, might be his first love. We learn in the introduction that Julian started leading tours of Europe in 1955, in his last year of high school, and every year since he has returned to Europe and to the galleries and museums to which we are introduced.

Julian says that his purpose in writing this book “is to introduce the gallery-going novice to the world of European painting.” Rather than writing a book that pretends to be an art history book or a museum guide, Julian says, “I want to talk to those viewers unencumbered by too much knowledge and say, look, here are 149 paintings or murals that I believe you must see before you die.” It would have been interesting to read a review of the book by a member of the “unencumbered” group, to see what they make of the Biblical stories and swirling drapery that awaits them. I confess I am not part of that group. My family is English. My grandfather started taking me to the National Gallery in London as a six-year-old. Other children came home with a toy double-decker bus full of Smarties; I came back with a framed reproduction of Van Dyck's portrait of Charles II because the horse had a small head and I thought it looked funny. Since then, I have made it a point to look in earnest at many of the same pictures that Julian has chosen, and I am pleased to say that I am more than three-quarters of the way through Julian's checklist.

I have to say that the title makes no sense to me. Certainly 149 pictures are listed in the book; however, another 72 are illustrated in the “while you're there, you should have a look at this” category. So the book could just as easily have been titled *221 Paintings*. Maybe that seemed a little daunting? Or were all 72 vying to be number 150, and rather than break

that tie, it seemed easier to stop short? It's like asking, “Which of your children do you love more?” If you are looking for the answer to “Why 149?” it isn't here.

As part of the “encumbered” crowd, I would have been immensely interested to read a personal memoir of a life enriched by looking at these masterpieces. There are many engaging passages in the book, especially the chapter introductions about the galleries themselves



The Raft of the Medusa, an oil painting of 1818-1819 by the French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault, housed in the Louvre, Paris.

and the author's personal reactions to certain paintings – either encountering them for the first time, or returning to a painting after a number of years to find that his appreciation and interpretation of the work had changed. Perhaps because these passages have reflected my own experience, I wanted more.

Undoubtedly Julian is a storyteller. He notes, quite correctly, that one's appreciation of a work is helped by knowing something about the story behind the painting. There must be a backstory to some of these trips to galleries over the years. It is clear that Julian loves Rembrandt. We learn that he made a special trip to Stockholm to see the painting *The Oath of the Batavians*, painted in 1662. It is a good story, but I would have liked to know why he felt compelled to see the picture. How long had it seemed like a missing piece? It is clear that he had a profound experience in front of it, and the insights he conveys – the Biblical story, the application of the paint, and his interpretation of and response to the work – are among the best in the book.

I think anyone can quibble with the selection of works. Botticelli's *Primavera* in the Uffizi makes the list, but his *Birth of Venus* doesn't even get a mention. They are in the same room. *Birth of Venus* is, to my mind, the more important painting. It is an icon of the Renaissance. Similarly, we are taken to the Brera Gallery in Milan, but we don't even make a pit stop in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie to see Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. It doesn't



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even get a mention. Sir Kenneth Clark called it the climax of Leonardo's career as a painter. Hard to leave it off the list in favour of a *Last Supper* by Veronese in the Brera.

My only real concern with this otherwise excellent book is the treatment given to the *Mona Lisa*, which is not in either the 149

“What better place for the novice to start learning how to really look at a painting than the *Mona Lisa*?”

list or the 221 list. Julian says: “It is also important to know what to skip in the Louvre. In that category, in my view, is the *Mona Lisa*.” Julian tells us to “just glance at it from a distance” and move on. Impossible. Yes, the colours are unfortunately muddy. Yes, it's small. Yes, it is recessed behind thick, bullet-proof glass. And, yes, it is mobbed with tour groups taking pictures of it to document that they were there. Yes, it is all of that and more. However, you

can stand in front of the picture – and you should. The school kid from Kansas will get the *Mona Lisa* and the back of your head on his iPhone photo. Tough luck for him.

Returning to the Introduction, Julian says, “To really look at a painting takes time. The artist may have spent a month or more on the work, so it is only fair that you attempt to understand it, to give it the time it deserves with your uninterrupted gaze.” I find it hard to reconcile that advice, with which I entirely agree, with being instructed to give the *Mona Lisa* a passing glance. The gallery-going novice needs to learn how to look at a painting. *149 Paintings You Really Need to See in Europe* gives readers many of the tools to help them develop an appreciation for art that will provide pleasure for a lifetime. What better place for the novice to start learning how to really look at a painting than the *Mona Lisa*, a work that you can conjure in your mind's eye? Even better, standing in front of the *Mona Lisa*, viewers can make their own assessment of the painting after giving it the uninterrupted gaze it deserves. You may decide you don't like the *Mona Lisa*, but make that choice after study and reflection, not after a passing glance.

Other than the *Mona Lisa* admonition, Julian's book is useful for any gallery-goer who, like many of us, is under time constraints. *149 Paintings* will ensure that they hit the highlights and maximize their museum-going experience and pleasure.

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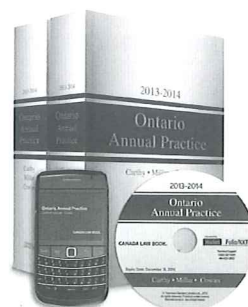
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