

VAN GOGH TO GO:
CROWDING THEM IN AT THE LACMA

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friend recently went to Paris for the first time and visited the Louvre. She went to see the art, of course, but when she returned, it was the throngs of fellow tourists she talked about. She had tried to take a picture of the Venus de Milo time and time again. No sooner had she lifted the camera to her face, however, when another pair of tourists stepped up, each wanting to be photographed with the statue by the other. Camera at the ready, my friend waited several minutes until she got her chance to snap a tourist-free picture. Later, she was a little disappointed. “That’s not the way it looked,” she said, only half-joking. “I should have taken a picture with the tourists in it.” Having seen “Van Gogh’s Van Goghs: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam,” a mobfest at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) some months before, I knew exactly what she meant.

Marcel Duchamp believed that art dies, that art, like the person who created it, has a life span. After 40 to 50 years, he said, it becomes the history of art. If time doesn’t kill art, however, the blockbuster just might. The atmosphere is deadly, both in that the art is experienced in a maddening crush, and in that the art is treated as an attraction. Many have bemoaned how

museum gift shop items trivialize art. Certainly, the way we see Edvard Munch's "The Scream" was forever changed when the image was turned into a punching bag toy. But the blockbuster is just as guilty, though the evidence might not be as concrete as with, say, a Van Gogh pop-up book.

In the late 1970s, Americans flocked to a touring exhibition of the contents of Tutankhamen's tomb. Around the country, light bulbs flashed on above the heads of museum directors and curators. Since then, museums have staged countless blockbuster spectacles to keep the crowds coming and coming, using clever marketing to generate the kind of frenzy around long-dead artists such as Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh that is normally reserved for rock stars, championship football games and after-Christmas sales.

And what's wrong with that? Shouldn't we all be gratified to see people excited about art? Certainly, an argument can be made for the blockbuster. In a sense, they make museums—and therefore the art they contain—more accessible. The atmosphere of a museum during a blockbuster is less like a hallowed hall and more like a theme park. The problem is, in the ensuing frenzy to consume art, we destroy the experience for one another.

Among psychologists in the field of leisure time studies, there's a school of thought that says people visit art when they seek to be renewed. "Museums provide a space for renewal, where you can get away from the things that you normally think about," says museum consultant Beverly Serrell, author of "Paying Attention: Visitors and Museum Exhibitions," published by the American Association of Museums. "A museum is a real 'away' place, and a successful exhibit taps into that feeling of 'away'-ness. It provides a refreshing pause from daily life." Serrell believes that blockbuster shows often contradict that basic desire for renewal and escape that museums offer. Instead of visitors being refreshed by an intimate experience of great art, they can feel like sheep herded through a mass, prepackaged experience.

Last year "Van Gogh's Van Goghs," a show of 70 paintings, drew 821,000 visitors, more than any other exhibit in LACMA's history except "The Treasures

of Tutankhamen,” which drew 1.2 million in 1978. Hailed as a blockbuster before it even opened, “Van Gogh’s Van Goghs” was on exhibit for four months at the National Gallery of Art in Washington before it traveled to Los Angeles. In D.C. people reportedly waited as long as eleven hours to get a ticket, and scalpers enjoyed a brisk business.

In Los Angeles, the exhibit was greeted with the same breathlessness. It was hard to tell whether media accounts documented the tizzy or created it. It was, no doubt, a little of both. But the frenzy wouldn’t have been possible if the show had not had all the right elements, starting with the artist.

As one visitor at LACMA observed, Van Gogh “is one of about five artists that everybody knows,” thanks as much to the drama of his life as to his art. He is an artist that makes sense to the Prozac nation—sad, flawed, unappreciated. We can relate. The LACMA gift shop capitalized on Van Gogh’s cultural cachet with a button that read “I VISITED VAN GOGH AT LACMA.” in bright yellow letters against a blue background. The ironies are all too clear: The ultimate tragic outsider has been transformed into mass-culture superstar. Unlike a lot of contemporary art that leaves viewers baffled, Van Gogh’s work is accessible. You don’t need an art degree to understand it. You don’t need to understand it at an intellectual level at all. All you need is to be able to appre-

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THE ULTIMATE TRAGIC OUTSIDER HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO MASS-CULTURE SUPERSTAR.

ciate the beauty of images, the stunning use of color, the emotion that resonates from the canvas. The same can be said for Monet, who with Van Gogh, is one of the top museum draws. No one leaves a Van Gogh exhibit thinking, “I don’t get it.” On the contrary, we leave a Van Gogh exhibit feeling good about ourselves in part because we think we do get it.

Along Wilshire Boulevard on my way to the museum, the exhibit banners flapped in the warm breeze, a cloudless sky and tall palm trees crowned with

ragged fronds providing an incongruous backdrop for Van Gogh's pale visage. A Marie Callender's billboard boasted "Van Gogh ate here—Well, he would have." Van Gogh as pitch man. It could only happen in the block-buster era.

After arriving at the museum, I went to check out the huge, white hard-shell tent out back on the lawn. That is where the line to enter the exhibit began. Inside, the crowd swapped war stories—"I had to wait three weeks to get tickets!"—while waiting patiently in a line contained by a series of green fences that looked like cattle chutes. Meanwhile, a security guard using a bullhorn that obscured most of her face prepped the eager visitors by listing a set of Van Gogh's no-no's: "No weapons, mace, pepper spray, pocket knives, food, beverages of any kind, cameras or video cameras," she said to the cotton-haired tourists, suburban couples, fidgety teens, and artsy types that were gathered. Perhaps even more importantly, she told the crowd to take advantage of telephones and portable potties set up outdoors, warning that "once you leave the galleries, there is no re-entry!" When people at the head of the line finally got the signal to go, they took off walking in long strides, eyes bright with nervous anticipation, as if they feared being called back.

An hour-long wait in the tent before entry was par for the course. After passing through the metal detector, I breezed into the first gallery and took in my first view, not of one of Van Gogh's masterpieces, but of a sea of bobbing heads. The museum limited the number of people attending the exhibit to a "mere" 600 to 700 per hour. Crowds wound through awkwardly laid-out galleries of LACMA West, a department store in its former life.

In the second gallery, Debbie Hunter, a San Diego nurse and art student who visited the exhibit with her sons, was marveling as much at the crowd as the paintings.

"I'm not a patient person, so I just have to keep telling myself, 'everybody wants to see them, everybody wants to look up close'," she said. "You have to practice patience."

VAN GOGH AS PITCH MAN.

IT COULD ONLY HAPPEN

IN THE BLOCKBUSTER ERA.

Developing a viewing strategy proved crucial to seeing the show. Rather than strolling from piece to piece, the best technique for getting up-close to a painting was to shoot pinball-style through the crowd to an empty spot in front of a canvas. Watching the clumps of people wearing headsets for the recorded tour also proved helpful. As they moved en masse toward designated stops, entire walls of lesser-known works were momentarily left open.

In a corner of one gallery, Joe Jagatic, 32, stood studying “The Courtesan,” a painting of a geisha Van Gogh based on a print by Keisai Eisen. He looked at the painting from close-up, then at a distance, with his glasses on, then without. Earlier, while looking at “Still Life with Lemons and Quinces,” a luminous still life, Jagatic had gazed into the painting until he thought he could see figures in the brush strokes surrounding the radiant fruit.

“This exhibit is pretty remarkable. Hopefully when I go through my daily life, I can look at things the same way,” he said. “But I don’t have the time. You’ve got to live your life. You’ve got to catch the bus. Right now, I don’t have a bus to catch.”

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G.W. Moore, a Los Angeles resident who works in an adoption agency, floated through the exhibit, a small Buddha-like smile on her face.

“I’m not a big art person. I’m one of those, ‘I don’t know art, but I know what I like’ people. But some of his stuff jumps out at you and makes you feel serene,” said Moore, her face framed by dozens of tiny braids. “People sometimes forget how to feel, and he puts it all out there on canvas for you, if you can open your eyes a little bit and let go.”

One 3-year-old girl didn’t have any trouble getting near the paintings. Perched on her mother’s hip, she stared as if transfixed by “Self-Portrait as an Artist.” Perhaps drawn in by the intensity of the painter’s blue gaze, she leaned forward and planted a plump little hand in the middle of Van Gogh’s chest. My heart did a full gymnastic routine in the pit of my stomach in the seconds before I remembered the paintings were shielded by glass.

Tracy Griggs, 40, had to use a bit more cunning than the little girl to get a closer view. Every time she got a foot or so from a painting, a guard

appeared to tell her to step back, that is “until I lied to her and told her I forgot my glasses and she left me alone,” Griggs said, chuckling.

An amateur painter, Griggs was at the exhibit in part to study Van Gogh’s technique, and in part to remember. As a child, she had visited a Van Gogh exhibit with her mother. It was one of Griggs’ first shows.

“The only reason I would put up with these crowds is to bring back that memory and experience,” she said.

Not that she was having much luck.

“I don’t like hearing the noise, the chatter, and I don’t like hearing people’s critiques of art,” Griggs said. “I think that viewing it is a personal experience. One brings one’s own perspectives to it, and having the interference sort of minimizes the experience for me.”

I wasn’t having much luck, either. As I walked through the exhibit, I was continually conscious of the people around me—the jostling bodies, the insect buzz of voices. It was impossible to lose myself in the art.

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“This is not my idea of a meditative space, observed Anna Marie Hallal, 33, who would know about such things, being a gardener and a yoga instructor.

“I’ve been to some very famous museums, like the Uffizi in Florence—big lines everyday, and not this crowded,” observed her companion, Toby Loeffler, 29, a grad student at California State.

Some contemporary artists have made art by looking at the contemporary culture of the museum and the blockbuster. German artist Thomas Struth, for example, believes that “many works of art, created out of particular historical circumstances, have become mere fetishes, like athletes or celebrities.” Struth examines this fetishizing by taking photographs of people at museums around the world, observing how visitors interact with the masterpieces. The visitors, often dressed in shorts or T-shirts, make a strange backdrop to the backdrops of sumptuous hallways (at old museums such as the Louvre) and the artworks that frame them. In many of his photographs, the viewers look bored, dispossessed, or just blank. In a study taken at the

Museum of Modern Art in New York, visitors stand in front of one of Jackson Pollock's dynamic abstracts. They are blurred by motion, ephemeral, while the painting stands in sharp focus, arresting Pollock's passionate, vigorous paint splatters. Struth's photos seem to suggest that the real distance between the viewers and the painting is not only a matter of space, but a matter of time. In Struth's work, museum viewers no longer comment on art—instead, the art seems to be offering a silent commentary on its audience.

By the time I reached the last gallery of the Van Gogh exhibit, the crowd looked like a large assembly of wind-up toys. It was only possible to take small, mincing steps before bumping into someone and either changing course or coming to a standstill. Some of the paintings were visible only in fragments, in what could be seen over a shoulder, in the space between the heads of two people standing shoulder-to-shoulder. At the exit, a security guard periodically reminded us: "Once you leave, you can't come back!" Beyond, the gift shop beckoned, predictably larger than the galleries. The shelves were stocked with a stunning array of items: Van Gogh postcards, playing cards, screen savers, mouse pads, magnets, coasters, umbrellas, backpacks, T-shirts, scarves, beach towels, watches, lunch boxes, you name it.

Struth's photographs illustrate the distance between the viewer and the art. At "Van Gogh's Van Goghs," some museum visitors managed to bridge the divide, and connect with the art.

The art critic Dave Hickey once noted that museums "should be sites of mystery and desire." Unfortunately, at today's blockbuster shows, the biggest mystery is whether you can get close enough to an artwork to see it, and the most powerful desire is the yearning to escape the art-hungry masses around you.