

# What I Learned from Looking Closely

## Gabrielle Landry '23

On a Friday morning in September, I sit in front of Degas' *The Rehearsal*, taking in the pinks and blues of the ballerinas' shoes and ribbons, observing the brushstrokes that pull light from the windows into the studio, and imagining a backstory for the violinist playing in front of the dancers. The quiet of the Harvard Art Museums calms me. After a week of immersion in the "Harvard grind," an hour spent looking closely at this painting revives me. Time slows. The painting unravels itself bit by bit. Within a few minutes, a conversation between me and the painting begins.

When I leave the museum, campus looks and feels a little different. I notice how, across the street, the gate leading into Harvard Yard frames the back of Sever Hall. I notice the way the morning light lands on the still-green leaves. The air feels a little fresher and brighter, my pace a bit slower and calmer. No change is dramatic, but each makes me feel more relaxed and observant as I go about my day.

My time with *The Rehearsal* was the first of six encounters with paintings in the Harvard Art Museums throughout the Fall 2021 semester. My project, which I called *Looking Closely*, was simple: sit with six paintings for an hour each and write poetry in response. I considered *Looking Closely* not only a creative project, but a "journey in poetry" through the paintings.

Over time, as they asked questions, stirred memories, and evoked emotions, the paintings became like friends. At my introductory ballet classes, I couldn't help but picture the grace and simplicity of *The Rehearsal*. When taking the T into Boston, I recalled Monet's *Arrival of a Train*; cold, grey days of Fall (and the snowstorms this semester) reminded me of his *Road Toward the Farm*. Sargent's *Lake O'Hara*, Maris' *Landscape*, and Whistler's *Nocturne in Grey and Gold* spoke to me in other ways. *Lake O'Hara* reminded me to take time to pause and to appreciate the natural environment. *Landscape* and *Nocturne in Grey and Gold* evoked mystery and intrigue, like vivid dreams that fade quickly upon waking.

I was motivated to create *Looking Closely* because I have always loved the Harvard Art Museums, but I felt like I wasn't getting as much as I could out of my visits. I would wander through the galleries, pausing occasionally to look closer at one item for a minute or two, but I never stopped to really linger with a single piece in a single visit. I also was interested in exploring the ways in which different creative forms inspire each other. As a poet, I find that paintings inspire new imagery and ideas for my poems.

At first, I wasn't sure that I would be able to fill a whole hour just looking at each painting. I had never spent so long looking at a single piece of art in one sitting. During every visit, however, I realized how quickly time flew. Minute by minute, more details and connections revealed themselves. With each painting, I developed a process for examining the art and jotting down notes to hone my observations.

The process of creating *Looking Closely* taught me a lot about patience. There were many times when I became distracted or drowsy, but I found that letting my mind wander while staying guided by the painting—that is, remaining semi-focused on the painting but not being too hard on myself for getting a little distracted—helped me remain present and patient. I also learned to keep in mind that these artists spent way longer than just one hour to create their pieces, so I wouldn't hear everything the painting had to communicate in just a few minutes.

I also realized that I really enjoy this kind of artistic engagement. Before, visiting art museums felt like shaking a hundred hands at a networking event; now, spending time with just one work for an hour feels like having a good conversation with a new friend. When I return to art museums or encounter public art (murals, sculptures, etc.) around Boston and Cambridge, I see the works differently. To me, they are mysteries to unravel, layer by layer. I feel more comfortable taking my time with one or two pieces in an art gallery, rather than speeding through the space.

Finally, *Looking Closely* taught me that inspiration for creative expression can come from anywhere. One of my favorite ways to develop my poems was to imagine the characters in the painting as real people with hopes, dreams, and struggles. This kind of imagination sparked self-reflection as I considered my own thoughts and memories around beauty, new beginnings, adventure, home, friendship, and love.

I look forward to returning to the paintings in this project and to discover new works of art as I continue to look closely at art within Harvard's campus and beyond.