



by Rachel Troy

**G**ROWING UP IN THE SUBURBS OF NEW YORK CITY, I looked forward to school field trips to the city's museums every year. I remember staring wide-eyed at Vincent van Gogh self-portraits, the expressive blues recalling a lapping ocean. The doll-like lion of Henri Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, on the other hand, reminded me of my favorite Disney movie, and the colors of the sleeping woman's dress recalled the biblical story of Joseph's many-colored coat that I had learned in religious school.

# Across Time

## Transported by

### The World in a Tulip

My formal education in art began not in an art class, but in my 10<sup>th</sup>-grade European history class. In the beginning of the year, my teacher lectured on the Dutch Republic. As we studied Dutch culture, she presented slide after slide of tulip paintings from the Dutch Golden Age of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Not only were the paintings beautiful, but they were history lessons in themselves, telling the story of the Tulip Mania that followed the flower's introduction to the Netherlands in the 1600s.

Tulip Mania led to a profusion of tulip images, but their historical significance extended even beyond the subject matter. Many were not paintings but prints, a more affordable and increasingly common alternative made possible by technological innovation. Some works featured tulips in still-life paintings, a popular genre in the Dutch Republic. Unlike their European peers, who painted biblical subjects, many Dutch artists painted still-lives and landscapes instead. These tulip images were vivid proof that every aspect of a work of art—subject, composition, media, style—has a cultural context. I was enthralled.

As my history class moved on to new revolutions and wars, I began exploring art history on my own. On the bottom floor of my local library was a café that sold discounted books. A book I bought there, on the history of the color red in art, was the first art history book I read. And then the ziggurat of books on my bedside tables began to rise, biographies of

Caravaggio and histories of Pop Art stacking on top of mystery novels and Jane Austen romances.

I was enjoying these independent studies, but I also started craving a more formal approach that might help me piece together the patches of knowledge I had gleaned from my readings. Searching online for a summer course, I found a variety of art history courses offered at different colleges, museums, and galleries. I ultimately decided to take a six-week course at Boston University, where high school students could take university-level classes. I was considering Boston for college, so this would provide a chance to explore the city while taking an academically rigorous course. I chose Introduction to Western Art: Renaissance to Today.

### Art, Alive

The first Tuesday the class was set to meet, I went to the designated building—the College of Arts and Sciences—and found the classroom twice to ensure I wouldn't be late. I arrived at the classroom for the third time half an hour early and waited for my professor to arrive. I was nervous. I prided myself on being an excellent student, but how would I fare in a college course?

My anxiety quickly subsided. The atmosphere was surprisingly relaxed. My professor, Rachel Tolano, would lecture and then open the room to guided discussion. Although I was initially hesitant to participate, I found



Opposite page: Hans Bollongier, *Still Life with Flowers*, 1639. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Left: Antoine-Jean Gros, *Napoleon Visiting the Plague House at Jaffa*, 1804. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Below: Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434. National Gallery, London.

# and Space

## Art History

that engaging in class helped me both stay alert for the three and a half hours and consider new perspectives on different material. My classmates comple-

mented the professor's lecture with their personal knowledge and experiences. For example, during our discussion of Versailles Palace, a well-traveled

elderly couple shared their visit to the Hall of Mirrors, vividly describing how imposing the hall was and how disconcerting it was to have one's reflection projected endlessly. Another classmate majoring in costume design shed light on the somewhat confusing garb in *The Arnolfini Portrait*, a Jan van Eyck painting. The woman in the painting wears a billowy dress that led to speculation that she was pregnant. My classmate explained that a looser style of dress was actually favored at the time and not necessarily a sign of a pregnancy. These interesting tidbits and varied voices created a rich learning experience I'd never find in a book.

I was particularly attracted to the Romantic period, when artists deviated from a strict academic style and explored interests in the sublime. I especially enjoyed learning about Antoine Jean Gros' *Napoleon Visiting the Plague House at Jaffa*. This exotic painting piqued my interest not only for its beauty and representation of the burgeoning Romantic movement, but because I recognized the stone arches behind the glorified image of Napoleon and his army. I had been to the Jaffa

Gate on a family vacation in Israel only a few weeks before.

Standing under the hot Israeli sun, ferociously snapping pictures, I had been amazed to learn that the gate was erected in 1538. Surrounded by people in jeans with iPhones and digital cameras, it was hard to imagine the gate hundreds of years before. Seeing it memorialized in a picture with Napoleon added new dimension to my understanding of the site's historical context. Though I had seen its obvious age in person, I could now imagine the history of the gate, including serving as a backdrop for political propaganda in 1804 as Napoleon's army conquered Europe.

**S**UMMER WAS THE PERFECT TIME to explore—and deepen—my interest in art history. I look forward to next summer—and I already have a growing list of opportunities related to art, art history, and museum work that I might pursue. Maybe I will be sitting in a Christie's classroom in New York or volunteering as a docent at my local museum of natural history. Perhaps I will have the opportunity to go on a “Grand Tour” of Europe to view art and architecture, like 17th-century gentlemen and women. But until then, I know I can always sit in a comfortable library chair, crack open a heavy book, and be transported by paintings to the canals of Venice, or by images of architecture to the Acropolis of Athens. Art is my gateway to history, and to the world. **i**



**Rachel Troy**, a native of Connecticut, is a junior at Blair Academy, a boarding school in Blairstown, NJ. She enjoys writing, knitting scarves, and spending time with her twin sister. At school, Rachel participates in running the literary magazine and yearbook.