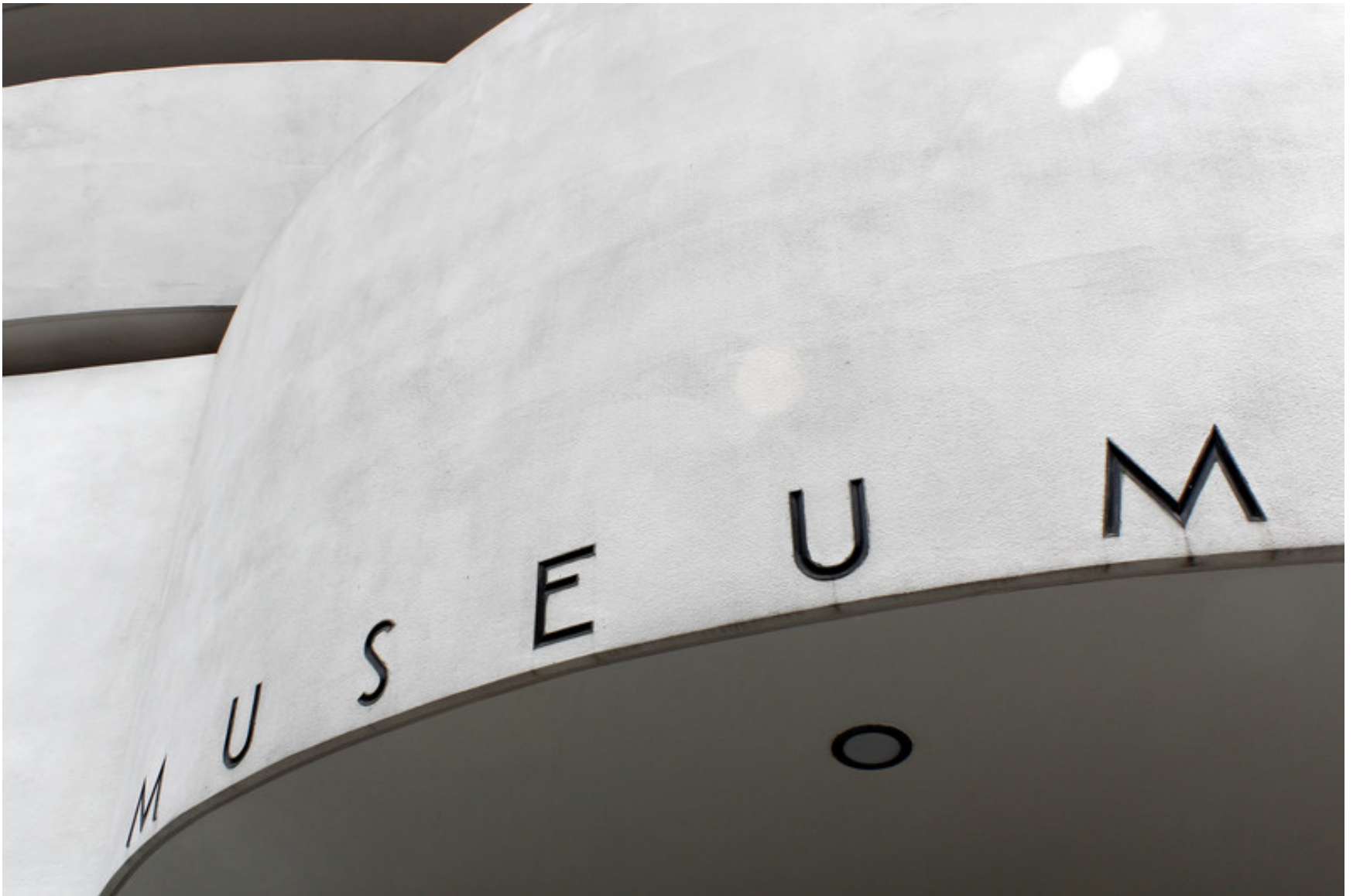


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## Art Attack

January 23, 2015

By Stephanie Susnjara



“I’m going to be an artist when I grow up,” declared my 4-year-old daughter Zoe. We were at the kitchen table admiring her latest painting: a swirl of twinkling sky, inspired by Vincent van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*. (Her preschool class had just read a book about the artist.)

I wanted to know what Zoe liked most about Van Gogh. Maybe it was his vibrant use of color. Or his thick brush strokes. Instead she giggled. “Mommy, I like him because he cut off his ear.”

No matter—a flame had sparked, and it was my duty to further ignite this new passion. Forty-five miles

south of our home, the great art institutions of New York City beckoned. We'd crash at my sister's downtown apartment, and I could spend a couple days showing Zoe actual Van Goghs and other fine art. And, nourish my own culture-craving (now car-pooling) self.

Armed with a handful of children's books on art from our local library, we boarded the train to Manhattan. Fifty minutes later, we pulled into Grand Central Station, having flipped through five centuries of artists—from Leonardo da Vinci to Andy Warhol.

As we climbed the great stone steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I couldn't help but compliment myself. Besides our crash course in art history, I'd been filling Zoe's head with cool facts we'd read on the Web. As we gazed up at the pillar-flanked façade, I told her how the Met holds more than three million works of art.

Zoe sighed, let go of my hand, and plopped down on the steps.

"I'm hungry," she said.

So focused on nourishing her mind, I forgot to pack the essential things in life, namely snacks. A hot dog from a nearby vending cart helped Zoe refuel.

Inside the woman at the information desk smiled politely when I told her Zoe wanted to be an artist when she grew up. She suggested we begin with the European paintings on the second floor.

I had difficulty keeping up as Zoe breezed disinterestedly through the galleries of Spanish, Dutch, Italian, and French masterworks. Finally I got her to slow down and look at an early eighteenth-century portrait, *King Louis XV, as a child* by Rigaud Hyacinthe. Louis was a real child king, I explained, who inherited the throne when he was five years old.

"Well, I have lots of dress-up clothes, too," she said. "I want dessert."

The queen had spoken. In the cafeteria, Zoe nibbled a cupcake crowned with pink icing, as I brooded over what to see next.

The open-air Roof Garden, with two massive stainless-steel sculptures by American artist Frank Stella on display, offered refuge.

"It's a jungle gym," Zoe cried, "and the other one's a ship!"

I held her back from crawling on the artwork. Instead we played pirates who had landed on a tropical shore.

"We need food," said Zoe.

There were no coconut trees in this paradise overlooking Central Park, but we were able to buy a bag of banana chips from the outdoor bar.

As I watched Zoe survey her ship from every angle, it occurred to me that the art she liked the most was abstract, because she could turn it into whatever she wanted. She wasn't like her mom, who always zeroes in on the curator notes before examining the work. Zoe went with her instincts, reminding me of something Picasso had said:

*"It took me four years to learn to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to learn how to paint like a child."*

Picasso was speaking about recapturing the emotional authenticity of a child's perspective. This theme, I realized, carried over into art appreciation, revealing an important truth: Looking at art is as individual an experience as making it. By resisting schooling I was letting Zoe discover her own meaning.

The next morning we visited the Museum of Modern Art, participating in Tours for Fours, a free drop-in program for kids.

“Zoe wants to be an artist when she grows up,” I told the guide, who nodded politely. Along with 10 other four-year-olds and their parents, we gathered around *Cubix*, an abstract sculpture by American artist David Smith. When the guide asked the kids what it resembled, Zoe said, “President Bush.” When asked to clarify, she changed her opinion to a “wedding cake.”

Everyone looked confused, but I beamed. By free-associating out loud, Zoe not only displayed confidence, she was connecting to the sculpture on a personal level. I realized that building an art education began with Zoe engaging in a fun, relaxed way.

After the tour we viewed Picasso’s cubist masterpiece, *Demoiselles D’Avignon*. Zoe commented, “He’s good because he makes things look not real.” When she saw the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollack’s *One: Number 31, 1950*, she stated, “I like him ’cause he just scribble scrabbles like I did when I was a baby.”

Wow, I thought. She really gets it.

Finally we were standing in front of Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, the inspiration for our adventure. I thought about telling Zoe how this painting was a radical departure from the Impressionist style, a work that heralded 20<sup>th</sup> century Expressionism. Instead we both stood speechless. The painting, with its whooshing spirals of electrifying blue and yellow, seemed to breathe, like a living organism.

Exhilarated, I decided to squeeze in one more museum. We taxied uptown to the Guggenheim, where Zoe marveled at the historic Frank Lloyd Wright building, squealing, “It looks like a big slinky, Mommy!” Inside we raced up the spiraling walkway to the viewing galleries, where we stumbled—quite literally—onto Piotr Uklanski’s *Untitled (Dance Floor)*, a light-flashing, music-thumping disco surface where patrons could do the hustle. Amid a few self-conscious adults clapping and shuffling, Zoe leaped and twirled until she was just a blurry vision, becoming one with the art.

After 30 minutes of boogying, she said, “I want to be a dancer when I grow up.”

Stephanie Susnjara’s essays have appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Italian Americana*, *Brain, Child*, *Brevity* and other publications. She lives in Katonah, New York, with her two children.

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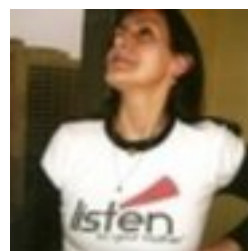
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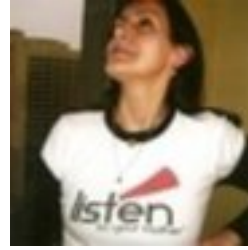


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