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The Guermantes's Elstirs and Proust as Virtual Museum

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As art museums closed their physical doors in spring 2020, they quickly opened new digital ones. A quick Google search of “virtual museum tours” provides instant access to the most famous art institutions in the world, and ‘best of’ lists to help curate your digital tour experience. In April 2020, the *New York Times* reported that since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic the Louvre’s online traffic had increased tenfold, and the Google Arts & Culture project had partnered with hundreds of new institutions to ensure online access to their collections.¹ The VOMA, the world’s first “Virtual Online Museum of Art,” has recently opened, currently featuring an exhibit called “Reclaiming the Body” that unites masterpieces from Botticelli to Kahlo together in one digital space.² My own intermediate French students normally enjoy visiting our campus museum for their oral interview assignment, so during the fall 2020 semester we made do on Zoom with the Pompidou Center’s chef-d’oeuvre collection from their website.

All of these examples speak to our hunger for visual art in a world where museums and galleries, like other communal spaces, are increasingly difficult or impossible to access in the time of coronavirus. The rise of the virtual museum tour is a twenty-first century solution to an older problem: how to “see” art you cannot visit in person. In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, it was exactly this problem that led the Baron von Grimm to ask Denis Diderot to review the expositions at l’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris for his periodical *Correspondance Littéraire*. The periodical’s subscribers included monarchs in Russia, Poland, and Sweden, and Diderot’s reviews would, in theory, help them vicariously experience the best of Parisian art from outside of France. One imagines they may have been disappointed by Diderot’s first installment, written in 1759, which is hardly more than a list of names and sizes of paintings and brief biographical notes about the artists. Diderot writes to Grimm, less than enthusiastically “[v]oici à peu près ce que vous m’avez demandé. Je souhaite que vous puissiez en tirer parti,” noting as well that “nous avons beaucoup d’artistes ; peu de bons ; pas un excellent,” and asks his friend to consider his obligation settled.³ By the 1765 installment, however, Diderot finds inspiration by understanding himself as an embodied viewer in active exchange with the art works he is seeing. He writes to Grimm:

¹ Jason Farago, “Now Virtual and in Video, Museum Websites Shake Off the Dust,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/arts/design/best-virtual-museum-guides.html> (Accessed September 10, 2020).

² <https://voma.space/> (Accessed March 20, 2021).

³ Denis Diderot, *Salons*, ed. by Jean Adhémar and Jean Seznec, 2nd edition, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–83), I, 63, 69.

C'est la tâche que vous m'avez proposée qui a fixé mes yeux sur la toile et qui m'a fait tourner autour du marbre. J'ai donné le temps à l'impression d'arriver et d'entrer. J'ai ouvert mon âme aux effets, je m'en suis laissé pénétrer.⁴

As his reviews grow in length and ambition, Diderot invites his readers not only into the exhibition spaces, but into the paintings, and, eventually, even outside of the Académie entirely to experience painted landscapes as real ones.⁵

Diderot's readers, of course, had no option to explore the art works on display in Paris in virtual form, and it is entirely possible they would have preferred a digital stroll through the best of that year's paintings and sculptures to even Diderot's most inspired and engaging writing on the subject. It is worth noting, however, that today we recognize Diderot's salon reviews both as a foundational document in the development of art criticism as a genre and as an important literary text in their own right. Meanwhile, the Chardins, Vernets, and Greuzes he discussed are largely passed over by visitors to the Louvre in search of the Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo. While writing about art cannot replace physical painting and sculptures, it can offer an alternate space for contemplation of visual art. While Diderot's art writings had the museum or the gallery as a dedicated space for viewing art at their core,⁶ Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* offers an even better analogue for the digital museum in the time of coronavirus: works of art liberated from museum space and inserted into the domestic sphere of the text.⁷ The superimposition of masterpieces of art history onto everyday experience is a leitmotif of the *Recherche*: Swann sees Giotto in the kitchen maid⁸ and Botticelli in Odette.⁹ The narrator under the tutelage of Elstir at Balbec sees Whistler in the sky outside his bedroom windows¹⁰ and a

⁴ Cited by Stéphane Lojkin, "Diderot, le goût de l'art," in *Le Goût de Diderot: Greuze, Chardin, Falconet, David*, ed. by Michel Hilaire, Sylvie Wuhrmann, and Olivier Zeber (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2013), pp. 27–89 (p. 31).

⁵ *Le Goût de Diderot: Greuze, Chardin, Falconet, David* (see footnote 4) is an excellent visual introduction to Diderot's salon reviews. On the landscape in eighteenth-century aesthetic thought, see Jacques Rancière's recent book, *Le temps du paysage: Aux origines de la révolution esthétique* (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2020).

⁶ While Diderot and Proust differ in that Diderot's art writings always refer to real works of art, unlike Proust's, critics have compared the two. Thomas Baldwin identifies Proust's writing about art as "Diderot-like" in "Proust's Picture Planes," in *Proust and the Visual*, ed. by Nathalie Aubert (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 131–48 (p. 133). Nicolas Valazza has linked Diderot and Proust via Chardin in *Crise de plume et souveraineté du pinceau: Écrire la peinture de Diderot à Proust* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013). See also: Baldwin, *Picture as Spectre in Diderot, Proust, and Deleuze* (London: Legenda, 2011) and Gita May "Chardin vu par Diderot et par Proust," *PMLA* 72.3 (1957): 403–18.

⁷ André Malraux's *Le Musée Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) theorizes a collection of works of art located primarily in the imagination.

⁸ Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 80.

⁹ Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, p. 220.

¹⁰ Proust, *À l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 438–9.

Chardinian still life on the dining room table.¹¹ While the transformation of the everyday into the aesthetic tends to be a spontaneous mental operation in the *Recherche*'s characters, its literalized correlate may be the museum challenges that proliferated during the coronavirus, where participants recreated famous works of art with objects in their homes and posted pictures of their attempts to social media. This practice, which Kirill Chunikhin calls "a unique corporal-material language of art interpretation," delocalizes the scene of aesthetic appreciation and valorizes the creative play of imagination and association.¹² There is another connection between Proust and the recreated art works. It is not just that aesthetic space is liberated from the confines of the museum into the everyday objects and familiar faces of our own households. It is also that we, the readers, must be directly involved in creating a museum space within the text. The textual flexibility of the Proustian universe allows the reader to be inside and outside of the museum space simultaneously, to engage or not with the art references depending on their interests, knowledge, and viewing background. If we are unwilling to spend time with the windows and dining room tables at Balbec, if we are unfamiliar with Giotto or Chardin or the conventions of landscape or still life painting, if we are distracted by our phones or TVs or pets, there might be no museum at all. The chance to explore the art spaces created in and directed by the text and liberated into our free-roaming imaginations is not a passive but an active one.

With that in mind, let us consider if writing about art in a text such as Proust's is a viable alternative to the virtual museum space. Can writers dialoguing with visual art provide their own sort of virtual art experience, one that compensates for what it lacks in literal color and form with imaginative flexibility and narrative engagement? Patrick ffrench has argued that the absence of references to the cinema in the *Recherche* allows Proust to "offer [...] an account of a virtual cinema, different from the actualized cinema as we know it" which serves as cinema's "functional competition."¹³ Can the *Recherche* serve as "functional competition" to digital museum spaces? In order to investigate this question, let us begin in a personal gallery where the duke and duchess of Guermantes have collected a set of Elstir's paintings, spanning several periods of his career. During a gathering at their home one evening, Proust's narrator pursues their collection while the Guermantes politely refrain from letting him know he is delaying dinner. The narrator's time with the Guermantes's collection of Elstirs comparable to time in a museum in that the narrator is, like Diderot in my introduction, an embodied viewer engaged in a sensory and cognitive dialogue with the works of art immediately before him. However, the larger context of his time with these paintings is more closely reminiscent of our own online lives. He is at someone's home, and what is supposed to be a quick glance at the paintings in fact distracts him entirely from the social task at hand. He needs to see the Elstirs quickly enough to return to dine with his hosts and their guests, and to leave in time to keep an appointment with Charlus, only "[s]eulement une fois en tête à tête avec les Elstir, j'oubliai tout à fait l'heure de diner."¹⁴ While digital museums are not the worst offender in the category of digital escapism,

¹¹ Proust, *À l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 506. See also Eric Karpeles's *Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to In Search of Lost Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008) and Kazuyoshi Yoshikawa's *Proust et l'art pictural* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010).

¹² Kirill Chunikhin, "Visual art experience during the coronavirus pandemic," *Social Anthropology* 28.2 (May 2020): 239–41 (p. 239).

¹³ Patrick ffrench, *Thinking Cinema with Proust* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018), p. 1.

¹⁴ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 406.

the forced homebound time of the pandemic is rife with virtual distractions from the people and objects around us: Netflix binge watches, social media feeds, and “doomscrolling” through news site updates. As our time at home stretches on, fictions of productivity evaporate into the shimmering mirage of a virtual world. For the narrator, Elstir’s printings are a similar escape from the tasks of the world around him: they are “comme les images lumineuses d’une lanterne magique.”¹⁵ With the monotony of household chores, meals at home, and the pressure of constant time with one’s loved ones, or the opposite pressure of constant solitude, this idea of “images lumineuses” is both the screens that engage us and the fact that they are the only way out of otherwise unescapable spaces. The reference to the “lanterne magique” of course sends us back to the beginning of the *Recherche*, where the narrator’s comforting bedroom becomes strange and troubling with the addition of the magic lantern that projects a moving story across his walls.¹⁶

Here, though, these luminous images are engaging, not disturbing. An ensuing analogy for the experience of seeing Elstir’s optical illusions reinforces the idea of artwork as escape hatch: “Que de fois en voiture ne découvrons-nous pas une longue rue claire qui commence à quelques mètres de nous, alors que seul devant nous un pan de mur violemment éclairé nous a donné le mirage de la profondeur !”¹⁷ Art, visual and verbal, is this “mirage de la profondeur” that cannot actually let us out of our circumstances but can give a surprising and pleasurable stimulation to the brain. In this section, Proust introduces the seductive pull of the Elstirs for the narrator not by painstakingly detailing their objective features, but by creating an imaginative model of the narrator’s cognitive responses to the artwork in front of him. Wilda Anderson has identified Diderot’s art reviews as experiential explorations, where “[h]e experienced the paintings as events rather than describing them as objects.”¹⁸ In order to get around the problems of expressing visual information in verbal form, Diderot changes the focus of that information — from the paintings themselves to the affective and intellectual responses of the viewer. Similarly, this passage from Proust does not so much allow us to recreate paintings in our mind as to recreate the state of mind we may have in a museum, in front of a painting we truly love, that shimmers before us like the entrance to a different world.

As the passage continues, the narrator guides us both through Elstir’s different phases of work, and through art history itself. After we are immersed in the initial description of his experience of viewing, a description with very little referential information vis-à-vis the contents of the painting themselves, this initial reverie cools to a secondary set of considerations. The narrator has been hooked by the world of Elstir’s paintings, and he now gives a more intellectual expression to his interest. This serves in part as a stroll back in time both through his mental museum and through Elstir’s career as represented by the Guermantes’s physical collection. Elstir’s newest and most experimental works are compared to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painters Chardin, Perronneau, Ingres and Manet.¹⁹ Elstir’s earlier, more realist work

¹⁵ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 406.

¹⁶ Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁷ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 406.

¹⁸ Wilda Anderson, *Diderot’s Dream* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 190.

¹⁹ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407.

inspires comparisons to the Renaissance through references to Carpaccio and Venice²⁰ and to medieval cathedrals and stained glass.²¹ Finally he sees some of Elstir's very early work, mythological settings invoking "les Muses" and "un Centaure," bringing the reader/viewer back to antiquity.²² These passages are not simply an invitation to test out our art history as we read, however, but a meditation on what it means to see. In a small, personal collection of one artist's work, the narrator finds resonances of a museum's worth of visual information. What matters is not so much the diversity of material before him, but the contemplative space he steals for himself when he should be politely chatting with the Guermantes and their guests. The narrator compares the "horreurs" that traditionalist viewers find in Elstir's work to their approval of eighteenth-century painters Chardin and Perronneau, noting that their condemnation and praise stem less from a hard-and-fast distinction between representational and experimental work, and more from habits of viewing. With the benefit of "cette perspective du Temps," an Elstir and a Chardin will come to look the same, the narrator argues, just as he has known viewers who went from seeing a "distance infranchissable" between one of Ingres's chefs-d'œuvre and Manet's *Olympia* only to find that eventually "les deux toiles eussent l'air jumelles."²³ These specific examples lead an argument about our ways of seeing, with the paragraph ending with a warning that "on se figure toujours se trouver en présence d'une expérience qui n'a pas de précédents dans le passé."²⁴ This reminds the reader that art history and art appreciation are not fixed quantities to learn, but dynamic, living processes in which we can participate. Turning to the next set of paintings, which are "plus réalistes" than Elstir's current works, the narrator feels himself "ému" due to their apparent reality. He notices the same figure in several paintings, and muses that it must be a real friend or patron in Elstir's life.²⁵ He describes a river scene as "carré de peinture [...] découpé dans une merveilleuse après-midi" highlighting the notion that (some) art is taken directly from real experience.²⁶ Unlike Elstir's current work, which portrays optical illusions and perceptual accidents that surprise the viewer, these works appear to be drawn from Elstir's lived life and emotional connection or recognition.

The narrator does not use these to set up a hierarchy of representation, but rather to highlight the pleasurable potential not only of the sight of the paintings themselves, but more so the reflections and speculations they occasion. In her introduction to the 2018 *Poetics Today* special issue on ekphrasis in the digital age, Renate Brosch proposes an updated definition of ekphrasis that is "interest[ed] in adaptive and collaborative processes," "a literary response to a visual image or visual images," and "performative instead of [...] mimetic."²⁷ This contemporary understanding of ekphrasis can change our retrospective view of writers highly engaged with visual art as well.

²⁰ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407.

²¹ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 408.

²² Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, pp. 408–9.

²³ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407. A similar line of argumentation appears earlier in *Le Côté de Guermantes* when the narrator discusses habituation to new artistic styles with reference to "un nouvel écrivain" and Renoir, pp. 316–17.

²⁴ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407

²⁵ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407

²⁶ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407

²⁷ Renate Brosch, "Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Images," *Poetics Today* 39.2 (June 2018): 226–7.

Brosch's emphasis on process is apparent throughout her discussion, as is obvious in the lexicon of adaptation, collaboration, response, and performance in the above quotations. G. Gabrielle Starr has also argued for a consideration of aesthetic experience that is process-based rather than object-based:

When we approach aesthetics thus in terms of events — and not primarily in terms of objects — we foreground dynamism and temporality, even at a minute level: for example, the emotions that help define aesthetic experience are far from static, having varying durations and changing intensities.²⁸

Proust is not describing paintings to teach us something hard and fast about painting, but rather to foreground the cognitive experience of viewing art, which is a series of exchanges: between the viewer and the painting, between the reader and the text, within the viewer/reader's own internal dialogue, and, in the case of this particular passage, between visual and verbal art.

The narrator's final set of speculations as he contemplates the Elstirs center around the idea of "l'Instant," touching on the double nature of this temporal marker. The realist paintings portray the instant as always already ending, never to return, while the mythological paintings gain realism and gravity because of the painter's attention to the specificity of the instant portrayed. The narrator notices that the realist paintings, rather than preserving a moment in time for future contemplation, seem to hover on the edge of irreversible change: "cette toile si fixée donnait l'impression la plus fugitive, on sentait que la dame allait bientôt se retourner, les bateaux disparaître, l'ombre changer de place, la nuit venir, que le plaisir finit, que la vie passe."²⁹ The painted instant makes these figures seem to flee, whereas in the mythological paintings the exactitude with which Elstir paints the very minute the hero is living "donne, en l'instantanéisant, une sorte de réalité historique vécue au symbole de la fable, le peint et le relate au passé défini."³⁰ These paintings both displace and anchor their subjects in time. This mediation on the instant serves two potential functions for the contemporary reader. It reminds us that literature and visual art have temporal overlap: it is not that visual art captures frozen time and literature forward-moving time. The narrator's diegetic time halts while he explores the complex temporalities of the paintings in front of him. We too can use art to halt time and to escape our current, quotidian circumstances, but painted or written time must also flow back into quotidian time. This is the second function this meditation serves for the contemporary reader, who has had their awareness of temporal distortion or confusion heightened by the changes wrought by the pandemic. We have a new awareness of how quickly the instant fades forever, how quickly the world can be recreated into a different one, how quickly we can lose what we thought were the essentials of our lives. But we too have become an inextricable part of a "passé défini," with our subjective daily sense of time superseded by a larger sense of what it means to live in history. Time has never been more fleeting, and never more absolute. Journeying with the narrator into Elstir's painted temporalities might give us a needed pause from our own, but it also reminds us we are not the first or the last to live in this murky in-between. As the narrator

²⁸ G. Gabrielle Starr, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), p. 18.

²⁹ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 408.

³⁰ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 409.

speculates on painted time, he is simultaneously inhabiting the temporal plenitude of this space of solitary contemplation, and the social exigencies of the collective time shared with the Guermantes and their other guests. The reader, themselves simultaneously operating in a disorienting personal temporality and a hyper-present historical temporality, is thus invited into a *mise-en-scène* of this type of temporal doubling.

An early text of Proust's, an 1895 essay titled "Chardin et Rembrandt," begins by discussing the relationship between museum-going and the domestic sphere. The essay's opening dramatizes the torment of a young poet returning from the Louvre to be confronted by "la banalité traditionnelle de ce spectacle inesthétique" of his home: the half-cleared dining room table, his mother patiently knitting, a malevolent-seeming cat.³¹ Proust advises the poet to return to the Louvre, not to escape this quotidian banality, but rather to learn to love it through studying Chardin's paintings of "la vue d'un buffet, d'une cuisine, d'un office, d'une chambre où on coud."³² As Christie McDonald writes, through Chardin's paintings the poet will learn to "see them everywhere in his own kitchen. That is, Chardin's work will be integrated to the point where it infuses all space as though it were a still life."³³ Art is the cause of domestic malaise in this text, but it is also its cure, and Proust will go on to incorporate the essay's still life-esque vision of the poet's dining room table into *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, as the narrator learns to appreciate the quotidian through his study of Elstir's paintings and methodology. While at Balbec the narrator takes delight in the objects left undone and half-empty on the table at the end of the meal because "[d]epuis que j'en avais vu dans des aquarelles d'Elstir, je cherchais à [les] retrouver dans la réalité, j[e les] aimais comme quelque chose de poétique."³⁴ Proust's advice from his earlier essay is fully dramatized here: the narrator has learned to see beauty where (for him) there was none before. Whereas prior to his experience with Elstir he had spent meals gazing "uniquement du côté de la mer," now he feasts his eyes on a host of miraculous sights at the table.³⁵

It is quite a lot to ask art appreciators who have been in their homes for weeks or months without reprieve from their partners, from their loneliness, from dinners to cook, from tables to clear, from pets or children to care for, to learn to gaze upon these sights with renewed eyes as if they were charming painted material. And, after all, during the pandemic even Parisians could not go to the Louvre and refresh their weary gazes in the eighteenth-century wing, were they to want to. Chardin's paintings could only be viewed inside of the domestic space, in miniature on screens that are already overused. But reading Proust's wandering descriptions of the Guermantes's Elstirs gives us a different sort of renewal, that of escape which is not escapism but rather a

³¹ Proust, "Chardin et Rembrandt," in *Essais et articles*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 68–78 (p. 68).

³² Proust, "Chardin et Rembrandt," p. 69.

³³ Christie McDonald, "I am [not] a painting: How Chardin and Moreau dialogue in Proust's writing," in *Proust and the Arts*, ed. by Christie McDonald and François Proulx (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 40–55 (p. 42).

³⁴ Proust, *À l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 506.

³⁵ Yae-Jin Yoo writes of this scene that "la description métaphorique du spectacle banal correspond à la transcription littéraire d'une toile de Chardin": Yoo, *La peinture ou les leçons esthétiques chez Proust* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), p. 43.

mental challenge that makes us more aware of how and why we look at art. Elaine Scarry has argued that only visualization enacted under literary instruction can come close to the real experience of sight, writing “this ordinary enfeeblement of images [when visualized rather than directly perceived] has a striking exception in the verbal arts, where images somehow *do* acquire the vivacity of perceptual objects.”³⁶ While Proust’s collection of paintings is hardly mimetic, it does plunge us into the experience of appreciating art. That is, not the viewing per se, but what we are doing inside ourselves while we view art: musing, meditating, free-associating, questioning, daydreaming. Later in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the narrator criticizes the duchess of Guermantes for her “parole [...] méconnaissant la façon dont se forment en nous les impressions artistiques.”³⁷ He is reacting to her claim that a certain painter’s work would be worth seeing even “du haut d’une impériale de tramway sans s’arrêter.”³⁸ The narrator fundamentally disagrees with her implication that “notre œil est dans ce cas un simple appareil enregistreur qui prend des instantanés.”³⁹ In order to benefit from such a quick viewing, the eye would have to be able to glimpse a painting and carry it away a complete memory despite the less-than-ideal viewing conditions. But viewing a painting is not like taking a photograph, and our “impressions artistiques” are impacted by the conditions of viewing, by physical sensations, by societal norms, and by mental activity.

The scene of the narrator with the Guermantes’s Elstirs is not a description of paintings viewed but a recreation of the act of viewing. Our computer screens are not substitutes for physical works of art, and neither is Proust’s text. But Proust’s virtual museum has the advantage of helping us rebuild the imaginative space we inhabit when we are able to physically engage with visual art: appreciating the marvelous surfaces of the painting, thinking of other artists we have admired in the past, noticing details that seem drawn from real life, feeling suspended from or fully present in time. At the end of the narrator’s visit with the Guermantes’s Elstirs, he is reawakened to his social duties by the discomfiting thought that he has been forgotten and the dinner has already started: “le silence [...] qui durait déjà depuis très longtemps finit [...] par m’éveiller de ma rêverie.”⁴⁰ French defines reverie as a state where:

the time of the present and the need for action and movement can relax their hold on the attention and allow it to be suffused with memory and imagination. The referential real recedes, to become one layer among others of the palimpsestic text of thought.⁴¹

Starr’s work on the neuroscience of aesthetic experience studies how works of art, both visual and verbal, activate the default mode network, which is “a set of interconnected brain areas that are generally active in periods of waking rest but whose activity generally decreases with external stimulation.”⁴² Of the powerful cognitive benefits that come from this state of engagement with art she writes:

³⁶ Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 4.

³⁷ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 507.

³⁸ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 507.

³⁹ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 507.

⁴⁰ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 409.

⁴¹ French, *Thinking Cinema with Proust*, p. 26.

⁴² Starr, *Feeling Beauty*, p. 23.

It is not just that ideas and perceptions, however, become newly linked in aesthetic experience but that the *hedonic value* assigned to these perceptions and ideas at a neural level enables powerful connections that had not existed before. Aesthetic experience thus makes possible the unexpected valuation of objects, ideas, and perceptions and enables new configurations of what is known, new frameworks for interpretation, and perhaps even a new willingness to entertain what is strange or to let the familiar and the novel live side by side.⁴³

For Starr, aesthetic experience exists on the threshold between what is known and what is new, and that combination of the comfortingly familiar and the thrillingly unexpected can change the way we think. This is a fine balance: too much of the known, and the audience will not be pushed towards expansion; too much of the unknown, and the audience will become overwhelmed and frustrated. Proust discusses this familiarity/unfamiliarity dynamic in terms of the integration of new artists into existing artistic standards, as with Chardin giving way to Elstir, and Ingres giving way to Manet, but it is also a reminder of how aesthetic experience can help us grapple with larger unknowns. Ideally, our time with Proust will allow us to return to our lives refreshed, and better equipped to live in the tension between the comfortably familiar and the disconcertingly new. It is this sort of imaginative work that satisfies us when we are overwhelmed by external events.

The narrator eventually returns to his dinner party, finding that they have not begun without him but learning later that he delayed the meal by 45 impolite minutes as he communed with the Elstirs and with his own internal spaces of association and contemplation.⁴⁴ It is that sort of act of cognitive freedom that we desperately need in a time of physical confinement and emotional distress. Visiting the Guermantes's Elstirs with the narrator provides something that online virtual museums cannot: a space dedicated to reflection and imagination. In this case, of course, the space is textual rather than physical, but Proust's tapestry of reference, reaction, and imagination in the narrator's free-ranging thoughts invite us to share this contemplative space with him. This passage is a reminder of why so many of us have missed museums and galleries acutely in this homebound time, and it is a call for us to fully inhabit these spaces when we are able to return: forgetting our obligations, forgetting the hour, and engaging in dynamic exchange with the works of art before us.

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⁴³ Starr, *Feeling Beauty*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 410.