



STUDIES *in*  
THEOLOGY  
*and the* ARTS

# GOD IN THE MODERN WING

VIEWING ART WITH  
EYES OF FAITH

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## Visitation

### *Engaging Art as an Epiphanic Leap*

Tim Lowly

*The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life.*

JOHN BERGER

Hadlock enters the museum through the northern door, the entrance to the Modern Wing. This addition to the Art Institute of Chicago hadn't existed the first time he visited. On that day years ago, there had been a mid-winter snowstorm as they headed home from Chicago. But today it's summer, and the museum buzzes with visitors fresh from Millennium Park. Before entering, he could hear the loud thumping of percussion from an outside concert venue. *They thought of that in the museum design*, he thought, noting how little of the outside sound finds its way into the museum.

Wandering into the vast space of the Modern Wing's vestibule with a sketchbook and simple drawing tools in hand, he stops. *Now why*, he wonders, *did I come here today?* Then Hadlock remembers. He heads toward that strangely floating staircase, climbs its steps to the second floor and then to the third, observing that the part of the museum toward which he is ascending is, by height, *the highest elevation of the museum*. Is this hierarchy symbolic? Is it a metaphor for transcendence . . . superiority? *Is that the intent?* Slightly out of breath, he stops for a moment at the top of the stairs. *The light here is remarkable!* He breathes deeply and enters the gallery.

Again, the shift in the sound is palpable. *I actually never noticed this before.* Stepping into the gallery, the bustle and chatter of the entry hall is subdued. Hushed. *Like a holy place.* Inside the door of that gallery, the massive Matisse painting *Bathers by a River* faces him. Curiously, at least to him, the structure of the work seems to function like an altarpiece. He recalls the Matisse exhibition he had seen decades ago, built around this painting as the key work of the artist's early career. Having, over several years, moved through various it-



1.1. Hadlock's drawing of Pablo Picasso, *Old Guitarist* (1903-1904)

erations, the figures in the finished painting are abstracted, totemic. Acknowledging these painterly moves, he turns to the painting itself, the one he first saw as a child in the "Painting" section of the P volume of the encyclopedia. Many paintings were reproduced in its pages, but it is this one that he recalls. It spoke to him with a somehow familiar voice as a child surrounded by poverty in a war-ravaged country. It only occurred to him, perhaps fifteen years ago, that the recollection of this painting was likely tied to his vocation, his inner voice.

*Blessed are the poor . . .*

In this same room there is a range of works by Pablo Picasso, and they illustrate the stylistic heterogeneity of his career, particularly his early days. Most of these paintings possess a kind of warmth, a humanity, a sense of touch. *I've never really cared for Cubist painting, even after that class on Cubism in college (I think it was probably that same winter we traveled down here).* But now, *I can't help but be grateful for the sense of touch, most evident here in the strokes of the brush on Picasso's portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler.<sup>1</sup> But the Kahnweiler painting came several years later than the one centered in the middle of the wall.* He always anticipates seeing this one. Picasso was only twenty-two

<sup>1</sup>See Joel Sheesley's chapter, "Cubism: The Real Figuration of Being," in this book.

when he painted this old, apparently blind and indigent musician. *Old Guitarist* (fig. 1.1) is predominantly blue—yes, the “Blue period”—amplifying its melancholic character. Picasso would become wealthy to the extreme, but when he made this work, he was quite poor. A close friend of Picasso had recently taken his own life; perhaps he was painting close to despair. That could be why he painted this work on top of another. Beneath the old musician is a faint image of a woman, perhaps with insufficient pathos. Now her eyes can barely be made out above the old guitarist’s bent neck. Loss and sorrow sung low. *I’ve seen this today . . . before . . . yes, the woman sitting at the edge of the sidewalk near the subway entrance, singing softly, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen . . .”*

*The poor you will always have with you.*

*Yes, but here, in a painting of unimaginable value in a country of unimaginable wealth? In its perfunctory materiality, the patched together panels, painted as if wrestling—struggling, awkwardly—with clay, the breath of life barely, there? Perhaps. Yes.*

His internal wandering is interrupted by a young Jamaican couple who ask if he can photograph them with the iconic *Old Guitarist*.

The woman suddenly exclaims, “El Greco!” Her companion’s expression turns confused. Seeing his perplexity, she offers, “This painting reminds me of El Greco, the way he elongates the limbs and puts the figure in this awkward, well, kind of awkward pose.” Her companion still looks puzzled, so she continues, “You know . . . El Greco, the one who made that painting of Saint Francis we were looking at in the old wing. You said the Pope took his name from that Saint . . .”

He is still holding her phone, waiting for the couple to turn toward the camera, but her comment startles him. He recollects: *They were about to elect him to be Pope, and another Cardinal leaned over and said to him, “Remember the poor.”*

*Yes, he thinks, remembering the poor elsewhere in the museum. Perhaps Picasso had El Greco in mind, but something about this brings forward that painting by . . .*

But his thoughts shift to yet another work in the collection, one by a Spanish painter slightly later than El Greco—*Velázquez*. Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez was the court painter of Spain, in service to what may have been the most powerful nation on the planet at that time. Curiously

(in relation to his status) he painted a work titled *Kitchen Scene* (fig. 1.2) that was added to the Art Institute's collection in 1935. It bears a striking similarity to a slightly earlier Velázquez painting, *Supper at Emmaus*, but with one significant difference. The title of the earlier painting centers the attention on the scene in the background where Jesus reveals himself to the disciples, and the maid in the foreground seems to turn toward that revelation. By contrast, in *Kitchen Scene* the maid is alone, so to speak. Like the composition in *Supper at Emmaus*, she turns toward her right, but in the *Kitchen Scene*, the young woman seems to fade into the background, her presence vaporous in contrast to the richly detailed kitchen ware. *Didn't Jesus disappear?* The absence at her back in this visually mute alcove resonates profoundly with the knowledge of what occurs in the background of the *Supper at Emmaus* where Jesus has just revealed himself to his startled companions. By her turning gesture, the foregrounded servant here appears to share that moment of recognition. But here, in the Chicago painting, *Kitchen Scene*, it is as if Velázquez intentionally obscured that biblical reference in order to say, "You who have eyes, open them to who is right here in front of you." A servant, perhaps even a slave of African descent: here, *she is the protagonist*.

... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The voice of the Jamaican woman jars him from his reverie.

"Hello?" She and her companion look at him with amusement.

*How long have they been waiting?*



1.2. Hadlock's drawing of Diego Velázquez, *Kitchen Scene* (1618-1620)



He hands the phone back to her. Suddenly her face brightens, “Hey! You look like Jesus!” Nodding, he smiles wryly. *Goodness, has Warner Sallman convinced everyone that Jesus was White?*<sup>2</sup>

As the couple walks away, her partner remarks, somewhat jokingly, “Well, what do you know, God must even be here in the Modern Wing!”

With that comment and the thought of the Most Divine—*here?*—he moves on, somewhat disconcerted. For no apparent reason, he notes the small print on the labels that accompany the artwork, which indicates who donated the piece to the museum. *Patronage.*

That word sparks the memory of a talk that one of his former professors delivered concerning early Protestant iconoclasm. He vaguely recalled the professor saying something to the effect that the reason for the destruction of artworks in churches was not solely that they were judged to be idolatrous, but also because the wealthy patrons, who had paid for the artworks, were pictured alongside biblical characters. *Is everything so compromised?*

As he enters the next gallery, a docent addresses a group of visitors, and one of her comments startles him. “The iconoclastic thread of Modernism perhaps starts with Mondrian.” He lingers just outside the circle of visitors, wondering. *Mondrian? Iconoclasm?* She continues: “Mondrian’s early work was fairly conventional. Beautiful, but carrying the conventions of representational painting. Then, due in part to his embrace of Theosophy, he began to abstract things. Most notably trees! Eventually he ended up with work like this!” She swept her hand toward Mondrian’s *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray*. Looking at her phone, she read a quote from Mondrian: “Art is higher than reality and has no direct relation to reality. To approach the spiritual in art, one will make as little use as possible of reality, because reality is opposed to the spiritual.”<sup>3</sup> The docent smiles broadly, “Yes! It is no surprise that later the most dominant art movement of the mid-twentieth century, Abstract Expressionism, was emphatically spiritual in its expression.”

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<sup>2</sup>*The Head of Christ*, painted by Warner Sallman in 1940, is one of the most reproduced artworks in history, having been replicated in various forms over half a billion times worldwide by the end of the twentieth century. Despite being loved by many, Sallman’s rendering of Jesus fails to take into account Jesus’ Jewish heritage.

<sup>3</sup>Ronald Alley, “Piet Mondrian,” *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery’s Collection of Modern Art Other Than Works by British Artists* (London: Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1981), 532-33.

A college student wearing a Nirvana T-shirt smirks and comments, “Yes, but Warhol and Pop art sank that pompous ship!”

The docent responds, barely masking her irritation, “Well I’m not so sure about that young man, but Andy Warhol certainly made graphic design central to Pop art. And what’s so interesting is that Mondrian profoundly influenced the abstract aspects of graphic design, so . . .”

His attention wanders with him to the next room and is rejuvenated yet again by his encounter with the disarmingly playful works of the Swiss artist, Paul Klee. *Playful? Yes, it reminds me of my friend Helen’s work, and why I loved it so much.*

Just then two men—*brothers, perhaps?*—come up and begin to talk with each other about Klee’s work.

“My kid could do that!”

The other scoffs affectionately: “Well, your son is talented, but . . .” Then he launches into a curious analysis: “If one looks at Klee’s early work, especially prior to 1907, it might be characterized as offering a tightly rendered cynical vision of humanity. In 1907, a year after Klee was married, his son Felix was born. Klee’s wife was a pianist. Her work as an instructor and a performer meant that Klee stayed at home, making his art there while tending to their son. Art historians have made little of it, yet it is striking to me how, over the course of his son’s youth, Klee’s art took on increasingly childlike qualities. That said, the cat was incredibly sophisticated at the same time . . .”

“If you say so, but I still think my kid could do that.”

*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

He gazes at Klee’s picture *Sunset* (fig. 1.3). The painting seems always to be there, waiting. *Always setting?* A dotted wall or a mountain. *Somehow like a Persian miniature, perhaps a vestige of that seminal trip he made to Tunisia in 1914.* The two men have moved on, but a museum guard eyes him with a bemused expression.

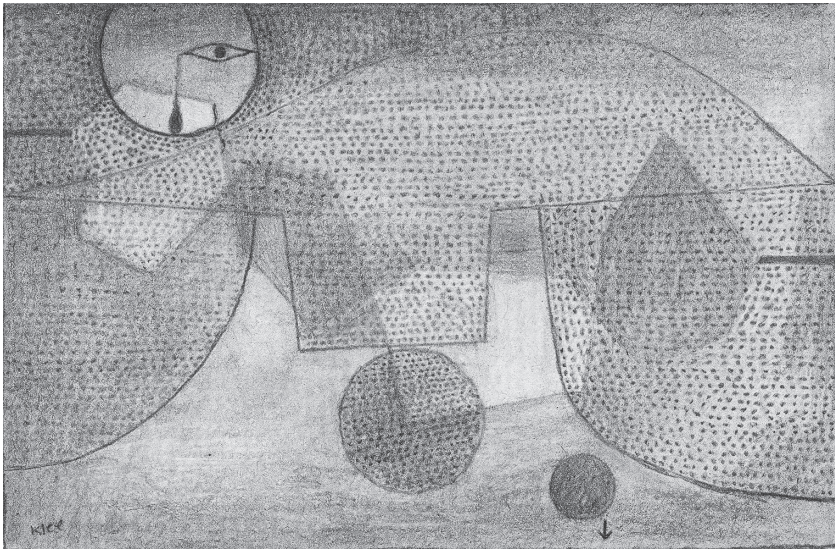
“Do you get it?” she asks, gesturing to the painting.

He has the feeling there is a joke, and he is missing it.

She comes closer and points to the little arrow—beneath the small red circle at the bottom right of the painting—pointing down.

“Sunset!” she exclaims.

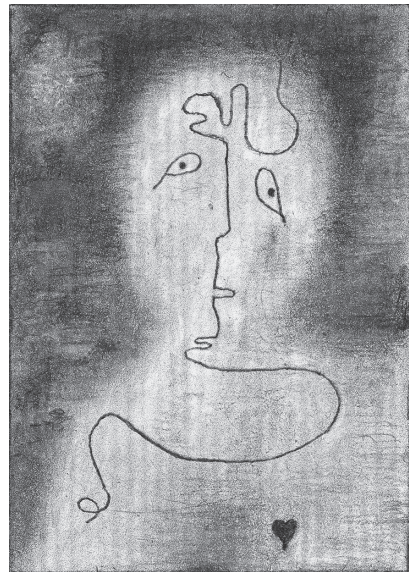




1.3. Hadlock's drawing of Paul Klee, *Sunset* (1930)

He smiles a bit ruefully, noting the tear falling from the eye at the top of the image. The tear foreshadows the sadness he senses in another Klee painting, *In the Magic Mirror* (fig. 1.4), which hangs nearby. It is a curious—yes, *still childlike*—image. In the “background” the blurred frontal silhouette of head and shoulders, even in its vagary, causes the meandering red line twisting down the middle to appear as a nose, a mouth, a doubled chin. On the side, simple loops and dots for eyes tilt wistfully, ruefully, mournfully. He notes the date, 1934, and recalls that following the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933, Klee had been singled out as a Jew, lost his job, and soon after left Germany to live in Switzerland.

*Childlike?*



1.4. Hadlock's drawing of Paul Klee, *In the Magic Mirror* (1934)

His mind moves further to a different room where the work of another Jewish artist, Marc Chagall, hangs. He goes there and stands to face *White Crucifixion* (plate 4).<sup>4</sup> Yes, Chagall's pictorial language also evokes the vision and imagination of a child. In this particular work, that propensity is especially poignant. Painted a few years after Klee's *In the Magic Mirror*, the horror and devastation of the Nazi pogroms is chronicled here as if witnessed by a child. In the center of the painting hangs the disconcerting and fitting crucified Christ. It is a turbulent and terrifying image mitigated only slightly by Chagall's "innocent" manner of representation.

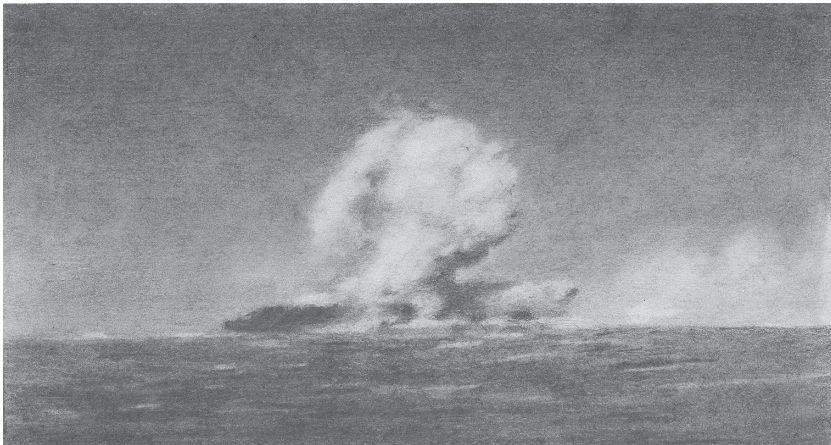
*Suffer little children to come unto me . . .*

A while later, having descended one level to a section devoted to contemporary art, he is drawn to a small painting by Vija Celmins (b. 1938), *Explosion at Sea* (fig. 1.5). Like most of Celmins's work, this one, the image of a ship at sea, has a curiously mute character. There has been an explosion of some sort onboard the ship. It feels like an old photograph in some way, timeless.

An elderly man stands to the side of Celmins, painting, sketching, or writing in a notebook. Sensing that someone else is present, he closes his notebook and begins to turn away.

"Were you drawing the painting?"

The older man turns, looking a bit lost, tilting his head quizzically.



1.5. Hadlock's drawing of Vija Celmins, *Explosion at Sea* (1996)

<sup>4</sup>See Matthew J. Milliner's chapter, "Chagall's Cathedral: Faith, Hope, and Love at the Art Institute's Modern Wing," in this book.

“The painting.” He gestures to the Celmins. “Were you sketching it?”

The old man shakes his head and smiles ruefully. “No, I was remembering.”

Like Celmins, he too is from Latvia, and like her family, he experienced dislocation due to both the Soviets and the Nazis.

“So this ship—this is from World War II?”

The old man shrugs. “Does it matter? If I understand correctly, in the ‘60s she—like Gerhard Richter—painted charged images such as these as if they were simply photos from a newspaper. She did so without acknowledging any personal meaning. A kind of Pop art.”

*It is interesting how artists in the modern era felt—and perhaps still feel—the need to disguise the personal as the general.*

“A perfect meeting of the banal and the calamitous!” the old man comments.

He isn’t sure that they are actually addressing each other’s comments, but he rather likes the elderly gentleman’s world-weary demeanor and his voice. They part with a handshake before moving on.

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

Recently he has been reflecting on the Beatitudes, wondering if they might be understood as speaking to one’s vocation. For some reason the old man’s voice resonates with this thinking.

*Yes, mourning.*

Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* and the Celmins, *Explosion at Sea*, feel similarly singular in the emotional tenor of mourning. But there is another artist—a contemporary Columbian—for whom mourning seems to characterize most, if not all, of her work: Doris Salcedo (b. 1958). That was his sense visiting the retrospective of her work, and he experiences it again now as he wanders into another part of the museum. *Untitled (Armoire)* (1992) (fig. 1.6) is composed of various pieces of domestic furniture that have been encased in cement, becoming a monolithic monument.

*Muted. Silenced.*

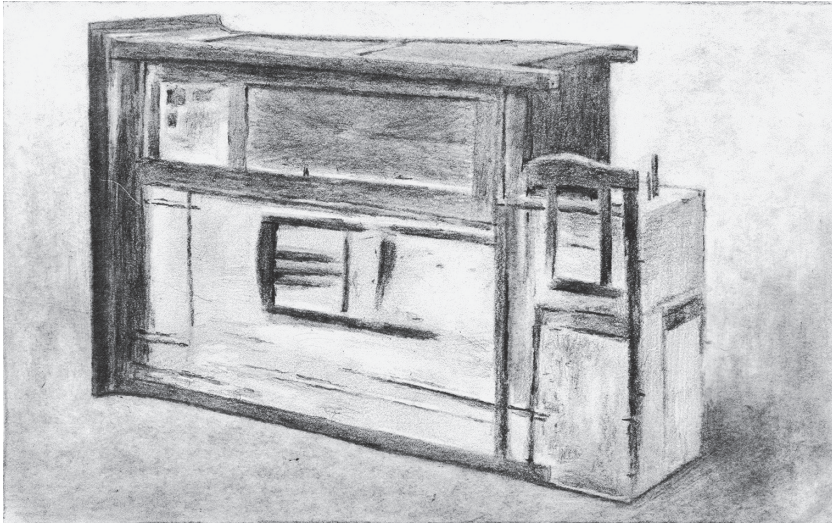
He can feel it in his body. Suddenly, he is aware of three women standing beside him. Nuns, speaking softly in Spanish.

Eventually, one of them turns to him, “Do you understand?”

He isn’t sure what she is asking.

Her hand shakes as she holds it out as if to bless the sculpture. She continues, “The loss is too much. The survivors, they cannot bear it. Salcedo buries these things. For them. In concrete. Do you understand?”





1.6. Hadlock's drawing of Doris Salcedo, *Untitled (Armoire)* (1992)

He nods and thinks, *But how could I understand, that kind of loss . . . ?*

But then he remembers. The nuns move on, but he remains, weeping.

*It's almost time!*

He had come to the museum early, planning to meet a friend later. Looking at his watch, he realizes later is now. He moves with haste to the room where they had agreed to meet, and she is there, standing in front of the large painting that holds the room: *Many Mansions* (1994) (plate 3). This painting by contemporary, Chicago-based artist Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955) is the one that he wanted to talk about with her.

"Sorry I'm late!"

She smiles wryly, knowingly. He feels a bit awkward having asked his African American colleague to talk with him about Marshall's work, but he wants her read on it, knowing the deep connection she has to Chicago's Black art scene.

*Many Mansions* is from a series of paintings of housing projects that Kerry James Marshall first exhibited in Chicago in the mid-1990s. Even then, the way they evoked—*parodied?*—a '50s utopian sense of White America was effectively disconcerting.

*I remember that exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center very well.*

She acknowledges that her own youth was elsewhere than the “projects,” as they were called. “Every time I would go by those places, they were so run down and dangerous. So it’s strange how he paints them almost paradisaically.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps it was intended as a critique of redlining in cities like Chicago and the way such projects eventually fell into disrepair and distress. The paintings are ironically powerful. But, as with all of his work there seems to be a kind of hope, a kind of reaching for something good and beautiful.”

*His work is famously, relentlessly forwarding Black life. With very few exceptions, all of the figures are painted in subtle shades of black.*

“You know we had access to work of Black artists in places like the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago. But, as Kerry says, when we went to the big museums like the Art Institute of Chicago, there were very few Black faces in the works of art hanging there. I definitely found that disconcerting and marginalizing.”

*This is something pale-skinned folks like me have historically taken for granted.*

“Yes, in that and other ways I find the work to be incredibly generous. And challenging!”

For a while they stood there looking in silence at the painting, and then he recalled his sense upon first entering the museum’s galleries and encountering Matisse’s *Bathers*. This painting also has that weight, like an altarpiece. The liturgy of loving labor, the Easterly foreground, the dignified young deacons digging, the banner floating above, proclaiming, “IN MY MOTHER’S HOUSE THERE ARE MANY MANSIONS.”

They laugh at the fitting irony and head out for lunch.

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