The Vermeer of Shoes

by John Olson

The Louvre is overwhelming. It's gigantic. You don't know where to start. There is such an infinite number of things too look at, angels and cherubs and devils and gods. Clouds and ships and flowers and mysterious aristocratic women. Sirens contorting in marble. Chariots floating in heaven. Sad kings and happy kings. Tragic queens and haggard old women carrying burdens of children and wood. Peasants dancing. Peasants sipping soup in hovels. Bowls of fruit. Vases of flowers. Eyeballs of dead fish gazing into eternity. Everything artfully, skillfully represented. So beautifully represented that in all honesty you don't know which is the real world, the true world, or the idealized world. Are these courtiers and hunters and card players and weeping women a world doctored by an early Renaissance master, or the world seen clearly, vividly, and rendered with such skill that it is a world more real than the world it represents? Are these lute players and merchants and tables and fruit the world as it is, the world as it truly existed five hundred years ago, or the world sublimated into eternal beauty by a skilled Dutch artist using pigments crushed in a mortar? Is this eye of lapis lazuli a true blue eye or the result of aluminum silicate with sulfur?

I will tell you: I brought a camera. A small digital camera so that in some way I could preserve what my memory was sure to lose. A small digital camera so that I would not need to spend seventy to eighty dollars on a fifty pound volume of beautiful prints. Which is cool in the Louvre. You can take pictures in the Louvre. This grosses out some people, some true art lovers, I know, I'm aware of that. I get it. Taking pictures of paintings in a museum is gross. I won't do it again. I promise. But I will also tell you that what I ended up with was a lot of pictures of my shoes.

My flash kept going off. The museum officials are strict about such matters. Sans flash! Sans flash, Monsieur! Ok, dude, I get it. Sans flash. But I can't get this new fucking camera to cooperate. I had a tough time understanding all the mysterious little icons and

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was weak with option fatigue from clicking through menus I didn't fully grasp, if I understood them at all. I was dizzy with incomprehension. I tried to find the automatic flash function and disarm the damn thing. But I couldn't find it. Sometimes I thought I had it and then pop! another frigging flash and a museum official staring daggers at me. What was once Vermeer's Seamstress of luminous yellows and reds and greens is now a faded replica of curly hair and fingers and pale concentration.

I got the bright idea of testing for the flash by taking pictures of my shoes. If the flash went off, it would harm nothing, and more importantly, the museum official would see that I was taking pictures of my shoes, either because I was enamored of my shoes, or because I was trying to gain control of the flash function on my camera, which would have been the correct assumption, though it would also be accurate to say that I was, indeed, enamored of my shoes, they had been the best running shoes of my running life before I retired them to the more sedate function of walking. And so what I have now are magnificent photographs of my shoes. My wonderful running shoes. My wonderful black running shoes. For the Louvre of my feet.

For whose feet are not a Louvre of bone and cartilage and elegant muscle?

If there were a Vermeer of shoes, this is what the painting would look like: a leg of denim leading downward to a black running shoe lightly dusted with the yellowish dust on the paths of the Jardin de Luxumbourg, where I had run that morning, before entering the Louvre, and discovering what art, what skill went into the production of my shoes.

For what shoes are not a Louvre?

What shoes are not also an Orangerie of nylon, gel, and rubber? A Georges Pompidou of eyelets and nails? A Musée d'Orsay of plastic weave and leather overlay?