

Lost in Learning: The Art of Discovery

Eva Koleva Timothy

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Art is antidote to our busy lives, says Timothy, full as they are with marketing and “hyper consumption.” She believes that art, and photography especially, can inspire or “sharpen our vision.” This is not a new observation, but it is perhaps more notable coming from a woman born in communist Bulgaria, and who might have come to the West with all of the hopes and aspirations that people in search of democracy and, invariably, capitalism, often have. Timothy is not disappointed, or at least she doesn’t let that on. Instead, she is grateful for her chance at a good education and has chosen photography as her means to communicate the value she finds in the process of learning.

In a world circumscribed by commerce and 24/7 media coverage, her photos are meant to provoke a little curiosity. “Outside all the dulling distractions there is so much life worth exploring, worth wondering about, and worth seeking after.” Hence, Timothy embarked on a project—Lost in Learning—in which she explores learning through the lens of those who have made some of the greatest scientific and artistic “discoveries.” A mother of three, she observed her own children’s appetite for learning, and postulates that that openness is not unlike the seed that would have led to Michelangelo’s painting of the Sistine Chapel or to Shakespeare’s adventures with language.

Not surprisingly, Timothy demonstrates an affinity with Galileo, who, as she describes in a concise essay, “For the third night straight, Galileo Galilei could not sleep. Rather, he gazed out the window, his one hand moving swiftly across the page as he sought to capture, in pencil, the miracle at the end of the lens.” The telescope he used to watch the moon and the rest of the night sky was an invention for which he would become famous and the means by which he—and we—finally came to understand much about our earth’s place in the universe. This seems especially potent because Galileo’s findings were counter to many of the dominant views in the early seventeenth century. He persisted, however, driven by a kind of “looking” that even a twenty-first century photographer with access to high-tech equipment can appreciate; tools are useful, yes, but curiosity precedes the invention.

This large format book is designed so that Timothy’s glossy black and white photographs are given space as well as context; historical figures are presented with introductory essays, and then through her photographs of artifacts and art representing their accomplishments. Almost every image in this sumptuously printed monograph includes a scientific instrument of some kind, including magnifying lenses, a military compass, sundials, prisms, and a planispheric astrolabe from c. 1400.

Isabella D’ Este, a woman with an unstinting desire for learning and who supported that pursuit in others, is also mentioned; she was known as First Lady of the Italian Renaissance and went on to build one of the first schools for girls in Italy. She also stands out as the only woman among the many men whose names we all already know; what a shame that Timothy was not able to turn up any others. No doubt there were others during the time frame under consideration—roughly the fifteenth–ninetieth centuries—or now. But even modern women continue to find value in the achievements of the famous white men whose discoveries continue to inform our lives. In any event, Timothy observes that to all of the people she covers, curiosity was central: “Their lives were built upon asking great questions.” These men (and one woman) used their imaginations, had vision, and were passionate; they wondered

and experimented and made great discoveries.

While much of the prose is beset with clichés, and certain readers will be lulled by the familiar trope of “learning as a voyage of discovery,” the photographs are the more elegant expression of Timothy’s intent. They glow with their striking use of focus and light; they underscore the important, ennobling place that learning should have in one’s life. Her careful studies of the artifacts of those who have opened doors to their most “daring dreams” will remind readers that capacious, creative minds make history.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (November / December 2010)

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