

FAITH IN ART

Some of the greatest art in the world is found inside of churches. As a result, especially in Europe, it's not uncommon to find great cathedrals functioning as museums, hosting throngs of art lovers largely indifferent (and in some cases even hostile) to Christianity and its beliefs.

In his new book, *Pilgrimage to the Museum* (Sophia Institute Press), Stephen Auth upends that formula by showing how to use a great secular art museum as the venue for a deep religious experience. His pilgrimage destination is New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, specifically its "encyclopedic collection of art in the Western tradition."

Choosing 61 paintings and sculptures – all but five of which can be seen at the Met – Auth leads the reader through 4,500 years of human expression. On the one hand, it's a museum tour; on the other, a meditation on the evolving story of our relationship to God.

In the process, he also tells us his own story. A lifelong student of art history, Auth seems to know every nook of the vast museum, and his expertise in painterly techniques and artistic influences helps us understand profound truths about these works. But he doesn't let his erudition distract us from his central mission: to reveal each canvas as a window into the soul of the artist and the artist's subject – as well as Auth's own soul, and (by invitation) the reader's.

Make no mistake, Auth is on a mission. His previous book, *Missionary of Wall Street*, told the story of his work as an evangelist on the streets of lower Manhattan, which he took up following a "come to Jesus moment" in the wake of a heart attack. *Pilgrimage to the Museum* also begins with an epiphany, this one in 2006, when Auth suddenly understands that he's been missing a key component of the masterpieces he has been



gazing at all his life: the presence (or sometimes the absence) of God.

The revelation comes while he's listening to a museum docent describing the brushstrokes and Asian influences in Rembrandt's *Toilet of Bathsheba*. She casually mentions that King David can be seen as a shadowy figure looking on from the background. All at once, Auth sees the painting in the context of David's imminent fall from grace and the artist's moral struggles. It causes him to reflect on his own life, too. In that moment, all his ideas about art are transformed.

There is plenty of explicitly Christian art in the museum, and Auth spends many pages unpacking its splendors. But he doesn't limit his survey to these works. The book's "pilgrimage" begins in Egypt, more than 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, and proceeds through the art of ancient, medieval, and modern times. Auth offers meditations on statues of godless Roman emperors, the ecstatic and devout works of Christian Europe, and the art for art's sake of more recent centuries, always probing for meaning in the light of faith.

Many of the great masters are here – Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, El Greco, Rembrandt, Van Gogh – as are other artists less famous. Stephen Auth shows us how their works illuminate our relationship to our Creator and invites us to reinvent our own lives in the light of their truth. ✧