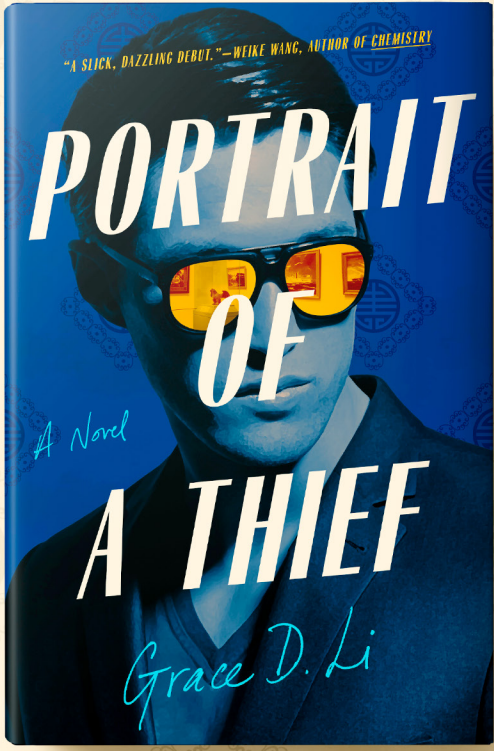




GRACE D. LI'S

MUSEUM GUIDE



CANTOR MUSEUM, Stanford, CA

As a tour guide at the Cantor, I can't help but have a soft spot for this museum. It's tucked away on Stanford's sunny campus, and when you step inside, you immediately feel transported elsewhere. Here are a couple favorites that I like to cover on my tours:

Lush Life #2 by Roger Shimomura, 2008

The first thing that I notice about this piece is the juxtaposition between the woman's sophisticated clothing and the red, almost bloody background. Look a little closer and you'll notice barbed wire fences—this piece is set in the Japanese internment camps of Shimomura's childhood, when 120,000 Japanese Americans, many of them citizens, were forcibly relocated to camps out of suspicions of disloyalty during WWII. To me, this piece presents overlapping, contrasting images of Asian American identity. When will we be American enough? Shimomura's quintessentially American painting style, influenced by pop art and Andy Warhol, suggests that we already are—even when we aren't viewed as such.





Chanel #VII by Wesaam Al-Badry, 2018

This print has a lot to catch the eye—the woman’s steady gaze, the chains, the Chanel niqab. It’s part of the artist’s Al-Kouture collection, which involved collecting designer scarves and turning them into niqabs. Let’s take a look at some history, which adds new depth to this piece.

- In 1909, the French luxury brand Chanel was founded.
- In 2010, France banned face coverings, including the niqab.
- In 2018, Wesaam Al-Badry created this piece as part of his Al-Kouture collection—the same year that the UN declared France’s ban harmful to the religious rights of women.
- In 2020, as we know, COVID swept through the world. In response, France mandated face coverings—but continued to ban niqabs.

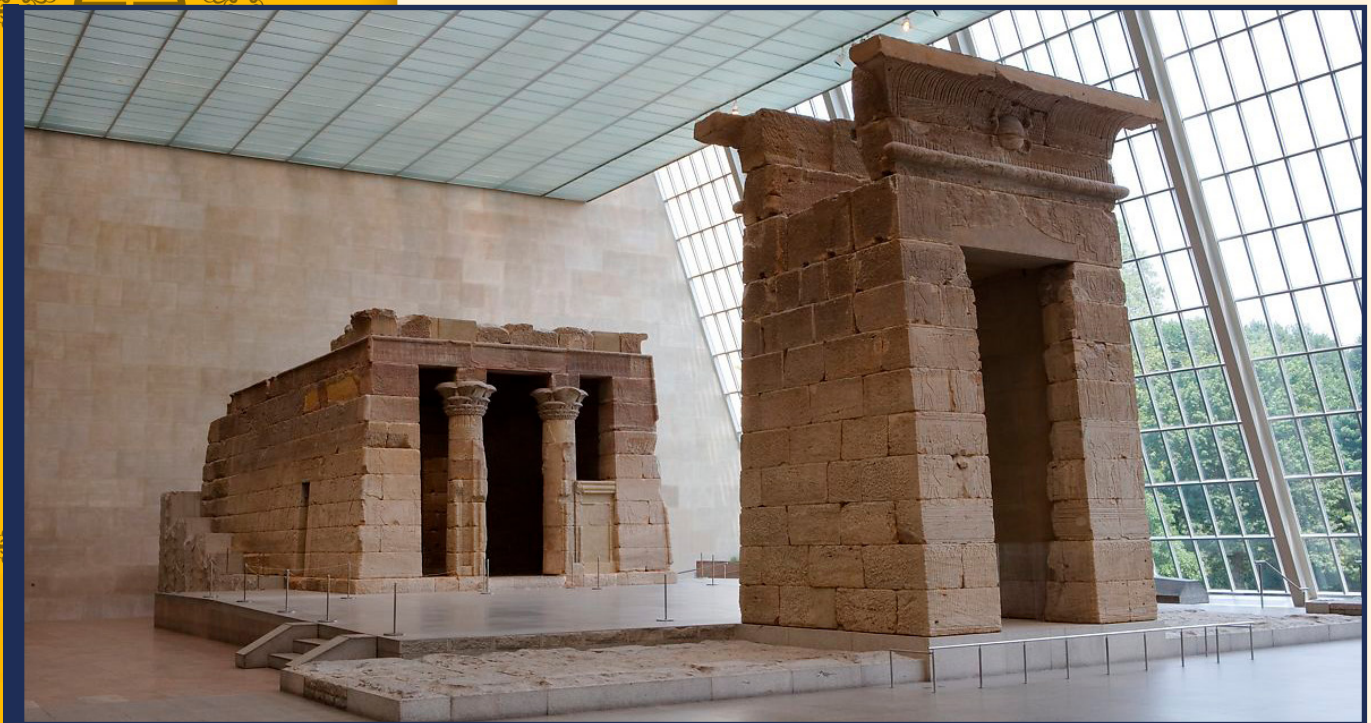
To me, this piece asks questions about what is and isn’t acceptable in Western society, and how religion changes when it’s linked to upscale fashion—or the other way around. But in the context of COVID, it also raises new questions about what rules society sets, and how arbitrary they may become.

THE MET, New York, NY

The Met is one of the most iconic museums in the world, one of my personal favorites to visit when I lived in New York, and (of course!) one of the museums that the characters in *Portrait of a Thief* set out to rob. A few highlights of this museum, some of which feature in the book itself:

Temple of Dendur, completed 10 BC

This temple was built by the Egyptians to honor the goddess Isis and several other deities, and is covered with carved reliefs of nature, pharaohs, and deities. I love this piece in particular because while art history is fraught with stories of stolen and looted art, this temple made its way to the Met through a gift from Egypt, to thank the US for its help in saving Egyptian monuments from destruction after the construction of a dam across the Nile. Stepping into this room is always breathtaking; the reflecting pool in front of the temple evokes the Nile River, and the sloping wall behind it suggests the cliffs of its original location. Even the stippled glass of the windows is designed to mimic the lighting in Nubia, and all of it together creates an atmosphere of serenity and reflection.



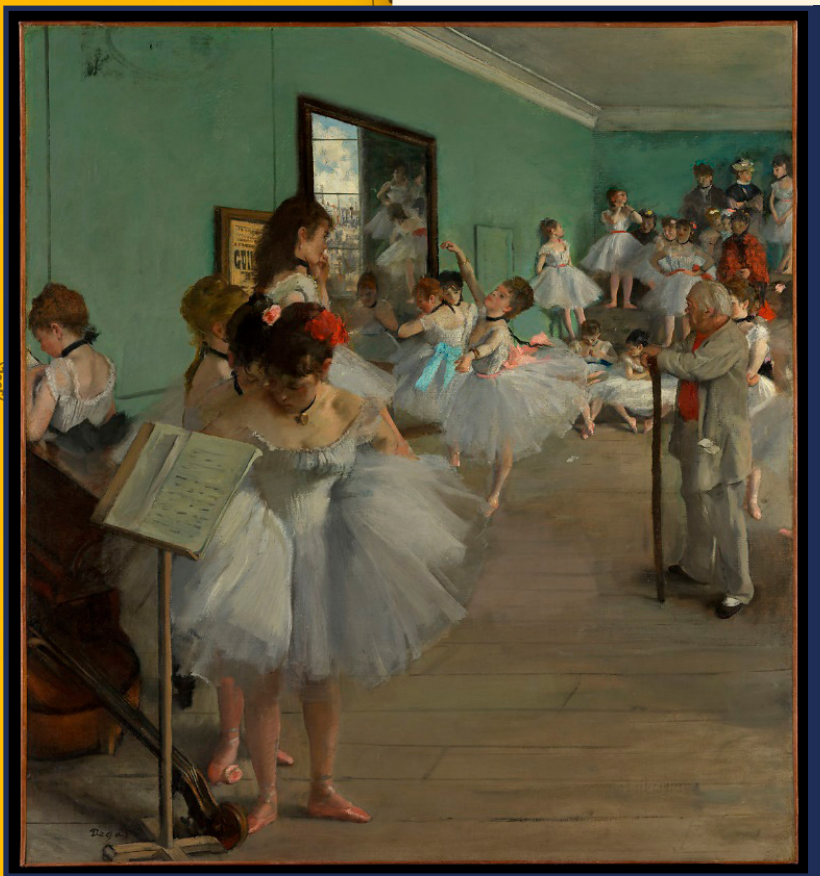
Immortals, 18th Century

This pair of jade sculptures are from the Qing dynasty, and specifically the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. Like much of the Chinese art in the Met, the provenance (also known as ownership) of these pieces only talks about the Western world; one piece was donated by an American businessman and collector of Asian art, the other was owned by a London auction house and purchased by an American couple who would later gift their collection to the Met (the Met, in turn, named the Asian art wing after them). Looking at these sculptures, I'm struck by their elegance, but also by questions of how they arrived in the West. It's easy to imagine them in the Old Summer Palace, the imperial residence of the Qianlong Emperor, which was looted by Western forces in the 1860s. These jade sculptures—and much of the art in the Asian art wing—remind me of how art can seldom be separated from history.



The Dance Class, Edgar Degas, 1874

Growing up, I always felt a little intimidated by museums—I was always afraid that, without a formal background in art, I was missing something crucial, that I couldn't "get" art the way I was supposed to. It was Degas' ballet dancers that changed that for me. I did ballet as a child, and seeing these dancers brought those memories back again. Looking at this piece now, I can point out new things—look at the texture of the brushstrokes, the emphasis on light and movement that's characteristic of Impressionism—but ultimately, appreciating this painting doesn't require a sophisticated vocabulary. Art can serve many purposes, but I think that if it can make you feel something, that's enough.



OTHER MUSEUMS:

SF MOMA • San Francisco, CA

Museum of Fine Arts • Houston, TX

The Nasher Museum • Durham, NC,

21c Museum Hotel • Durham, NC

The Museum of Chinese in America • New York, NY

The Guggenheim • New York, NY

PORTRAIT OF A THIEF MUSEUM CHALLENGE

1. Visit any museum.
2. Take a photo of *Portrait of a Thief*—or a photo of you holding the book—at the museum (following all rules for photography at that museum) and post it on Instagram and/or Twitter, tagging @gracedli and using the hashtag #portraitartchallenge.
3. For an extra entry, describe your favorite piece of art in a museum and why you love it in the caption.
4. Visit bit.ly/portraitartchallenge and fill out the entry form, including the link to your social media post.
5. Everyone who enters through the form, following all guidelines, will receive one of the custom *Portrait of a Thief* “Pantone” cards created by @bigbluetang. Those who describe their favorite piece of art in the post for an extra entry will receive two cards.

