

On “Museum Hours”
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“Museum Hours” is a 2012 film by Jem Cohen. It’s an extraordinary and fascinating film. I streamed it back in 2014 and was so taken with it I bought the DVD, which I’ve watched several times and it has always been a rewarding experience. This time (April, 2022), I particularly picked up on how, or so I believe, the film was created. Essentially, it is a collage, three disparate parts, or pieces, put together.

My guess is that writer/director/cinematographer Jem Cohen spent a great amount of time—weeks probably—with his camera filming whatever caught his eye in the area around Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Art Museum. No grand plan, just whatever struck him, the filmic equivalent of street photography. That was the first part.

The second part, he did the same thing inside the museum, focusing on the room with Pieter Breugel the Elder paintings, which included filming the paintings themselves as well as individuals and pairs and teenagers on a school field trip who happened to come into the room to view the works when Cohen was present. Whatever/whoever rang Cohen’s bell, as it were, during these times, he filmed it/them. Two exceptions to this spontaneity: a planned, ten-minute guided tour—the guide played by the actress Ela Piplits—explaining and advocating for Breugel’s artistic approach and merits; and an episode where, unexplained, three museum visitors disrobe (a surrealistic element that proved to be distractingly out of place in the otherwise realistic film).

I speculate that Cohen had these two parts set to go before he filmed the touching, very human, story of museum guard Johann and visitor-from-Montreal Anne, both no longer young--Bobby Sommer and Mary Margaret O'Hara superbly cast---which is partly scripted and partly ad-libbed. This encounter provides the narrative line of the film. In the editing process, Cohen inserted material from parts one and two. (Watch closely: it is made to appear that Johann was present during the tour; not so, that was filmed at another time.) Hundreds of insertions, hundreds of choices. Why does, say, some street scene go here? Well, it just does. Cohen experienced that in a gross, organic way, with all of his being, not just his intellect.

What does the whole of parts one, two, and three brought together as they are add up to? There are as many valid interpretations of Museum Hours as there are interpreters—you, me, Cohen himself. This last time, I picked up on themes around seeing, really seeing, and gentility and aging and isolation and death. Given who you are and your circumstance, including your stage of life, you will legitimately pick up on something else. Fine art is sensitizing and it is evocative, and it is about fundamentally important matters, and this film is indeed fine art. My congratulations and gratitude go to Jem Cohen.