

Speed art

Julian Porter has cased galleries in Europe so you don't have to 'waste your eyeballs.'

BY YAMRI TADDESE

Porter has been scratching away at his European art book for 30 years.

Liberal lawyer Julian Porter first went to Europe as an 18-year-old to admire paintings with a small group of peers. He liked the trip so much, and the role of tour guide, he still ushers folks through European galleries 58 years later. He travels with a bit more sophisticated company now (his fellow travellers include former Supreme Court justice Ian Binnie and former deputy prime minister John Manley), but he likes the experience all the same.

His love of law and paintings was most likely inherited. Former Ontario Court chief justice Dana Porter — his “wonderful, wonderful father” — was also a painter. One of the senior Porter’s paintings now sits on his son’s office desk in downtown Toronto. The junior Porter is now 76 and

runs a solo litigation practice.

He is a tall, lean man with grey hair and a penchant for theatrical descriptions. It’s that attitude he brings to his new book, *149 Paintings You Really Need to See in Europe (So You can Ignore the Others)*. It’s a collection of cheeky quips on select paintings in galleries like the Louvre, the Tate Britain, the Uffizi, and the Hermitage Museum.

The book “was long in the oven,” he says. In fact, he’s been scratching away at it for the last 30 years, renewing his thoughts after every trip to Europe — and he’s taken many — before focusing on it for the last five or six years. He’s looked at some of the paintings, he says, over a 50-year period. Dutch painter Rembrandt is one of his favourites. “One of my heroes is Rembrandt, and I most probably visited Rembrandt over 58 years. I must have

visited a portrait in the National Gallery of London of Rembrandt 80 or 90 times.”

Over the years, he’s had to fit in trips to Europe between suing and defending many media outlets. His litigation experience includes cases like *Reichmann family v. Toronto Life*, *Schreiber v. Lavoie*, *Yew v. The Globe and Mail*, and the Dubin Inquiry into steroid use by Ben Johnson.

For someone who has seen the paintings so many times, he says very little about each of them in the book. He wrote on average a 300-word critique of each piece, and it’s clear he enjoyed doing it. “The model for this Virgin was most probably a prostitute,” reads one of his commentaries on a Michelangelo oeuvre.

“I try to make it irreverent, and saucy, and hopefully make you laugh,” he says. The book, he says, is for people who want efficient visits to galleries without the sore

feet and tired eyes that inevitably follow such escapades. That's why Porter is very serious about art selection. "When I take tours, I insist that you first of all only look at about 30 paintings. You never look any more or your eyes are finished," he says. "In the Louvre, I go to room after room and Romans with swords and breast plates and limbs — do not look. There's Dutch flowers, a room of couches — do not look. You have to kind of case the galleries so that you don't waste your eyeballs."

Porter is so specific about which art people should see, he even recommends which entrance to use for some galleries, and gives tips on how to skip the long line ups. "The book is written for smart people who have done many other things in life but have never had time to focus on art," he says. "So it's my view of the paintings. . . ."

"An eclectic character" is how Binnie describes Porter. The retired judge went to Vienna with Porter as part of a tour organized by the Advocates Society. "We abandoned the official guides and went entirely with Julian, who is as eccentric as he is learned," he says. "We had a tour like no other."

No doubt Porter is knowledgeable about European art, adds Binnie. "But he also has a Julian-esque perspective, which is actually in some cases as interesting as the painting itself."

In case Porter ever takes you on a tour, there's another thing you should be aware of: stopping to take snapshots makes him surly. "I was in Holland [recently] and I was looking at Van Gogh, the second last one he did before he committed suicide . . . and a guy in front of me goes click, click, click," Porter says with a flap of both hands. "And he only looks [at the camera] and he's never looked at the painting, and I say, 'What is the point?' It is very, very annoying. You want to grab him! At least look at the damn thing, just look at it."


Each time he views a painting, Porter says he has a slightly different take on it. For example, his hero Rembrandt, who did 83 self-portraits before he died in 1669. "As I grew older, my opinion of him and what he was thinking [in the self-portraits] changed," says Porter. "I can't necessarily chart how they changed but I always take notes when I see stuff and it

looks perky, and maybe three years later it doesn't look perky and looks fatigued, or confused or something. It's part of the genius of Rembrandt."

It might have taken Porter 30 years to write the book between his law practice, but his household is well accustomed to publishing. His wife Anna Porter is the publisher of Key Porter Books, and author of three novels and two non-fictions, including a memoir titled *The Storyteller*, a *Memoir of Secrets, Magic and Lies*.

The feedback on his book so far has been good, he says. Binnie, whose review appears on the back cover, says, "Who can resist an art critic with an attitude?"

But not everyone will agree with him when they read the book, Porter admits.

"You might disagree with my opinion of the paintings, but it's there for you to argue," he says. "You might say, 'Well, he has a point there' or 'I always knew Porter was a turkey and this proves it.'" 

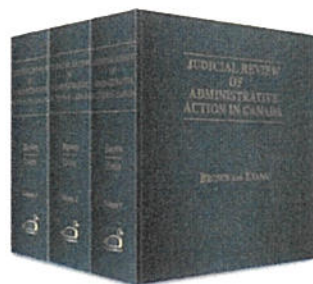
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