



Interview questions

1. Would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself?

Hi, my name is Wieteke van Zeil, I am an art historian living in Amsterdam and I work for the national newspaper *de Volkskrant* as a culture journalist. After having worked for several museums and being art critic for some years, I am now writing about looking at art in my series *Oog for Detail*, which is published in the newspaper's weekend magazine. In art works there are always things to discover and often these things can be connected to our present lives, so I write about the joy of experiencing art. Next to this, I write essays about cultural trends and new perspectives. Last year I had the opportunity to make a television program about art and emotions, showing how artists of all times have expressed emotions we all are familiar with, like anger, love and disgust. I love visual culture – also fashion, graphic design, movies, etc – as I think it makes our lives more interesting, and in times of tragedy, more bearable.

2. At one point in your book "Sieh hin!" you suggest that for you, the beauty and nuances in art are also a kind of refuge from the ugliness of the world. What sparked your passion for art in the first place?

Sometimes enjoying an art work can really feel like an escape. Like a song that makes you happy, even if things are difficult. And sometimes it seems like an artwork just communicates to your deepest feelings, even if it is hundreds of years old. Art is such an essential part of being human.

My passion for art started at school. I was not brought up with parents who took me to the museum (later, I was the one to take them with me to museums 😊), so I realize how important it is to get familiar with art through education and media. For me, the first spark was when I loved hiphop music as a teenager. Hiphop celebrates life and at the same time often is very socially conscious and engaged. The hiphop culture is also visual, so I learned about graffiti and Keith Haring and his fun style and also the awareness he raised about the AIDS epidemic. After that, I started to look at paintings, visited more museums and then I decided to study art history.

3. Why are you so obsessed with details in art? Is there one particular detail you remember that completely changed the way you look at the world?

My interest in details started when I felt that it was getting difficult to focus. There is constantly so much information coming our way. Also when you are in a museum, it is sometimes just too much. I get visually overloaded easily.

A small detail can be the perfect 'entrance' to improve your attention, and to getting to know an art work. Details are often so carefully made, witty and smart, and they can be so



touching. Maybe the story of a painting is difficult at first, but there is always a detail to connect with. I started taking photo's of favorite details, and now it has become my favorite way to look at art. Many times, a detail makes me understand or see the whole better.

I have many favorite details! If I can name one, I am thinking of the little scruffy dog on the famous painting *Le Balcon* by Eduard Manet. There are three well dressed people on the painting, looking outside, quasi interested. It is remarkable how isolated they are from each other and how passive and bored they seem to be. The only real action comes from the tiny dog I only saw after looking for the third time! The dog is behind the green bars of the balcony, there is a ball next to him, and he just seems so eager for action and fun. He is the only one that tries to engage with the outside world, and it suddenly made me feel like everyone is trapped on that balcony. The humans are so detached from the world. It is almost as if the presence of the dog reveals the real emotions that the people can not express. Manet must have had fun to paint this little rascal.

4. Some of the old masters' paintings you talk about are many centuries old. Why do you think they can be relevant for our modern lives?

Something an artist created ages ago, sometimes even millennia ago, can feel like it communicates personally to us now. This is one of the most powerful things about art, I think. No matter from which time or culture, art works show us key aspects of being human: love, fear, joy, jealousy, hope, fun, loneliness, grieve, revenge, desire. To recognise this in an art work or detail is to feel acknowledged in who we are and what living is about. It's magical.

5. What's new about your approach and why is it so important to you that we learn to look at art in a different way?

I guess one of the things is that I truly think art is for everyone. It is not a thing you can only enjoy if you have a certain amount of intellectual knowledge or if you grew up with parents who took you to museums. In all times and cultures people have had fun making things that express beauty and emotions, and that tell us something about who we are. Making material things to connect to others, also people living after us, is what makes us human.

Then, looking at details is an easy way to observe well, it helps to sharpen your eye. Especially in this present time of information overflow, looking at art details can improve our sense of attention. My approach is about the joy of observing, and staying curious to discover things you did not know before.

6. Why should we go to museums more often? And: Do you have an insider tip from one of your favorite museums, something we should be on the lookout for?



The good thing about experiencing art is that it is freeing your mind; we look at art (or enjoy music) not to score points, to reach a target or to earn more money. Going to a museum is, in a way, a form of play. You know you are going to see new things, puzzle them in your mind, there is a certain amount of 'expecting the unexpected' that makes it exciting and rewarding. There is more room for your emotions in a museum or theater, than in the supermarket or the workplace.

Insider tip: two museums that I love because they were made to have an enriching day when you visit them: Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen (they have palm trees under a glass roof in the middle of the museum!) and in Holland, I really love Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, a museum with lots of light and a surrounding sculpture park. Both of these museums are not too big, so no overflow of information, perfect for a lovely day.

7. You've thought of a number of very practical tips that can help us look at art and also the world around us with more mindfulness. Which one of your tips is particularly simple and efficient?

For me, everything became easier when I realized you do not have to know and see everything. Be selective - sometimes observing just a few art works is enough - and your museum visit will be so much more rewarding, more memorable and lots more fun. It also works in other parts of life ;)

8. In your book you also interview a number of very interesting people about their own ways of seeing. Remarkably, none of them are part of the art world. What is special about their "outsider perspective"?

When I started to write this book about the quality of focus and attention in looking at art, I realized that there is a strong parallel with people with different expertise. In some jobs, having an eye for detail, and connecting details to understand the whole, is essential. To show how this works, I asked other professionals – like a children's doctor, a festival organiser, an air traffic controller and a police officer – what the meaning of understanding details is in their work is. They gave wonderful examples, like Gerrit Hiemstra, our national weather man on tv, who showed us how we forgot to 'read the sky'. We are so dependent on apps and technique, that we can not see in the clouds if rain is coming. This is an example of loss of an eye for detail that all people used to have.