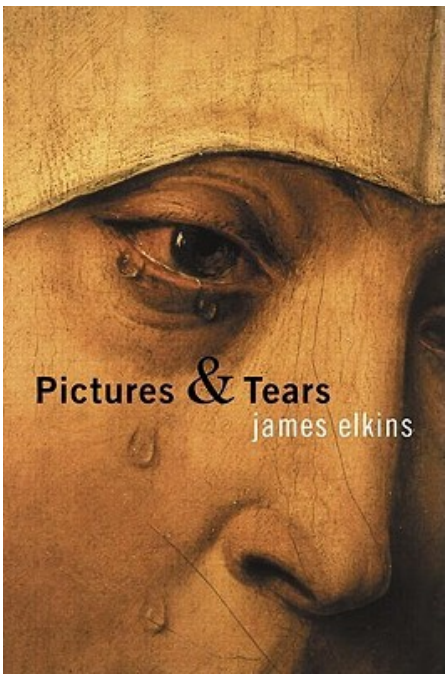

Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings

James Elkins

Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings

James Elkins

Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings James Elkins
Does art leave you cold? And is that what it's supposed to do? Or is a painting meant to move you to tears? Hemingway was reduced to tears in the midst of a drinking bout when a painting by James Thurber caught his eye. And what's bad about that? In Pictures and Tears, art historian James Elkins tells the story of paintings that have made people cry. Drawing upon anecdotes related to individual works of art, he provides a chronicle of how people have shown emotion before works of art in the past, and a meditation on the curious tearlessness with which most people approach art in the present. Deeply personal, Pictures and Tears is a history of emotion and vulnerability, and an inquiry into the nature of art. This book is a rare and invaluable treasure for people who love art. Also includes an 8-page color insert.

Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings Details

Date	:	Published February 25th 2004 by Routledge (first published January 1st 2001)
ISBN	:	9780415970532
Author	:	James Elkins
Format	:	Paperback 272 pages
Genre	:	Art, Nonfiction, Art History, History

From Reader Review Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings for online ebook

Mark B. says

This is my favorite of Elkins' books, and I'm a big fan. Every time I think that I have a new idea about art, I realize that Elkins has already written a whole book on the topic! Though I don't recall ever having cried in front of a painting myself, I have often been at the point of being overwhelmed. To this day, I get shivers every time I catch a glimpse of a Motherwell, and I don't particularly like Motherwells. That tells me that there's something beyond taste, or preference going on here, and that's the preface of Elkins engaging book.

Shortly after reading it, I got a postcard of a Rembrandt painting at the Met from a good friend. On the back, she just scribbled that she had cried in front of the painting on a recent visit to NYC. To this day, I keep that postcard tucked into this book as a reminder of the importance and relevance of this book to me.

Glorious read and a provoking investigation into something way-too-often avoided in dialogues about art and art history: physically emotional reactions to art.

Hani says

This is a book about people who have had strong emotional reactions to artworks. It tells a history of times and places when strong passions were expected, and contrasts them with the habits of the last hundred years. The book also has letters from people who have cried, and those who haven't or wouldn't.
That's the real power of Art, I think! The power to transcend our own self-interest, our solipsistic zoom-lens on life and relate to the world and each other with more integrity, more curiosity, more wholeheartedness.

Leanne says

One of my all-time favorite books about art:

Have you ever been moved to tears by a painting?

There is a wonderful letter, in James Elkins' Pictures and Tears, about museum goers looking at a landscape painting in Japan. The lady who wrote the letter to Elkins was in Tokyo as part of an Andy Warhol exhibition. Unable to speak the language and perhaps not all that knowledgeable about the culture, it had to be based on some kind of misunderstanding that she came to believe that the painting of a waterfall on rare display at the Nezu Museum, called Nachi Waterfall, was "a picture of God."

This painting is a National Treasure of Japan and is not displayed so often (I never managed to see it in 22 years there). So, not surprisingly, the exhibition was jam-packed full of people there to see it.

In the letter, she described how beautifully dressed the people were, many in formal kimono and some looked to be college professors. She said it was like going to the Met, except that when she finally got near the picture, she found the people around her to all be silently standing there crying.

It is an extraordinary story in an extraordinary book.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been overcome to tears by a painting? (It has to be a painting and it has to be tears).

James Elkin (my new favorite writer) is obsessed by Stendhal Syndrome--and since I am obsessed by Jerusalem Syndrome, I couldn't help but find myself increasingly intrigued. I never knew that-- unlike Mark Twain (who has a malaise named after himself too)-- that Stendhal, like so many others at that time period, had become so utterly enraptured by the art he saw in Florence that he became dizzy and had heart palpitations. In fact, apparently, he had to seek medical help. Elkins says that in the old days, it was much more common to be moved to tears by art.

In fact, as far as emotional response to paintings, we are living in a bit of a dry age, he insists.

More here: http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksda...

Amber says

It is nice to read Elkins' writing. He doesn't address painting analytically or literally, but intuitively and slowly. He isn't quick to interpret or lecture, either. His writing is a joy to read.

Amanda says

Such a fascinating book on such a strange topic -- who on earth cries in front of paintings? Quite a lot of people, apparently, and for almost as many different reasons as there are paintings and viewers. It's very odd to see an art historian tackle the topic of emotion -- not just represented emotion, but the emotions of people responding to art -- so head-on; usually that's Just Not Done. (Elkins, in fact, spends a fair amount of time discussing why it's Just Not Done to bring emotion into academic analysis of art.) In some ways this book is a bit of a meander from topic to topic; I sometimes wished for more of a unifying thread, besides "people bursting into tears while looking at art," and I also wished for a bit more history -- most of the accounts of weeping are from present-day art viewers who responded to Elkins' call for accounts of tearful responses to paintings. But the stories are marvelous, and anyone who's been moved to tears by a work of art (or literature, or music) will find Elkins' treatment of the subject compelling. For the record, I've never cried in front of a painting myself. But -- emotions being the contagious things that they are -- I cried quite a bit while reading the accounts in this book.

Ed Smiley says

It is sort of a forbidden topic among art historians and aestheticians. Should one experience a rarefied aesthetic experience merely? Or can a painting or other work kick your ass, and leave you flabbergasted? This book addresses this embarrassing question.

Granted, a particular emotional or transcendental experience may not have a permanent and objective significance that says all about a work of art for all time. True, art is a much more complex topic than just

getting weepy. But isn't art also about massing of feeling and experience, and do we not deny an important aspect at our peril?

Derek says

This is a great book. My eyes have been opened to the true power of art. (it really is documentary-ish, its not a novel) :)

Jimmy says

So, a book about people who have cried in front of different paintings throughout history? Sign me up please! I'd never heard of this writer before, but the unconventional treatment of art history was right up my alley. I love writing that explores the area between the academic (art/painting) and the non-academic (crying).

Though the author, Elkins, is a respected professor of art history, he was still able to remain open-minded to other ways of approaching art, never ruling out anything as 'invalid', but considering them all in the spectrum of different human reactions to art. Not so his colleagues. When beginning his project, he sent out a letter to many people, both art historians and regular art admirers, with a survey asking if they had ever cried in front of a painting before.

The vast majority of art historians either did not write back, or wrote back to say they had not--and did not think that crying was very professional. Many of the ones who did admit to crying wished to remain anonymous. The author says that we currently live in one of the most tearless eras of art history ever, and that it was not always this way.

The most interesting letters/surveys that came back were from non-art historians, just regular museum goers who had a special experience to share.

The book starts off with two chapters about the Rothko chapel (above), which I found especially interesting since I visited it just a year ago, knowing only Rothko’s more colorful output. I was oddly unmoved by these vast dark pieces, whereas Rothko’s lozenge-like color fields have been some of the paintings closest to moving me to tears in the past. But it was nice to read what others had felt in front of these paintings that I had not.

> "Some tears were mysteries even to the person who cried them. ("Tears, a liquid embrace") They came from nowhere, and in a minute they evaporate, like a dream that can hardly be remembered. What can be said about tears like that? I want to spend awhile now considering tears of all sorts, just to see how few of them make sense."

People cry in front of paintings for many different reasons. Some I found more useful than others, and

sometimes--I have to be honest--I thought the author was a little *too* open-minded, whereas reading the accounts myself, I felt that the crying had more to do with the person than the painting.

Elkins himself admits that he has not cried in front of a painting before, but I got a sense that he deeply wishes to be able to; all his knowledge prevents him from returning to that state.

Throughout the book, Elkins wrestles with the two approaches: emotional investment vs. intellectual distance. He shows you how throughout history, there have been periods of lots of crying and periods of sober intellectual distance. We are in one of the most sober periods in art. Elkins reminds us that modernism and postmodernism came about as a reaction against the high emotion, the carried-away-ness of romanticism. We live under the illusion that art does not need to move us, we walk from painting to painting in a museum as if consuming chicken nuggets.

But I don't know if it's so clear cut as that. We can be moved by highly modern and even post-modern works, like the woman who wrote letter #6 in the appendix (he collects some of his responses in the back) where she describes being moved to tears by the colors, the paint, and even the nails that hold the canvas to the stretcher. In fact, I think the most successful paintings for me are the ones that manage to create that illusion of Modernism's self-aware distance, yet still communicate strong human emotions--paintings that embody both intellect AND emotion.

> "In a subject like this, no matter how dusty a theory is, it might help, and a very dusty theory might fit best. I say that because I hope it's true: at least I know there is no hope for a well-behaved, legitimate-sounding theory where things are so wild."

Response to p.124-129

I understand Elkins is trying to play devil's advocate here, but his analysis is too simple. After giving us all the great reasons why we don't cry over a late 18th century Greuze painting (below), namely: cultural/generational differences that affect how we look at painting, and at ideas like nobility, patriotism, love, etc. and how we don't see things as black & white but as more complicated shades of gray, as well as how we look at things that are overly sentimental as manipulative, he goes on to say that nevertheless we cry at sentimental Disney movies and Dick and Jane books, etc. Then he says:

"There must be some other reason why Greuze is so powerless to move us. The answer, I think, lies in our fear of crying."

Well I find that completely absurd, given what he's just told us. If we fear crying, why don't we fear crying at Disney movies and Dick and Jane books, as he JUST told us? No, we don't cry at Greuze paintings anymore for the same reason (most of us) don't find 20's comedies funny anymore--because attitudes about what's sad/funny/etc. change within the span of decades, and even faster now. I agree with Elkin's point that we should free up our tear glands more often when it comes to art appreciation... and I agree that fear of crying is probably one of the many factors for why we don't cry at more paintings... but fear of crying is NOT the reason we don't cry at THIS Greuze painting, in particular.

In other words, just because we should cry doesn't mean we should still be crying over the same things we

cried over in 1785! That’s absurd... if we’re to cry today, it will have to be something that makes OUR generation cry--something that speaks to us, like Rothko did in Chapter 1. How can such a simple point elude Elkin, when he pretty much outlines it right there earlier in the chapter? I feel like he willfully misses this obvious point towards the end of the chapter. But why?

About Museums

I think what he says about museums being a busy, brightly lit area seems to be one of the strongest reasons for not crying. And in fact I wonder why he doesn’t harp on this point more. Maybe because he thinks the museum experience may just be a symptom of our attitudes towards art rather than the cause. The chicken or the egg? Hmm...

He talks about how much more conducive to emotional reactions it would be if museums would dedicate each room to just one painting, where the light is dimmed and a soft light is cast on the painting.

Although I think this is a good idea, I can see why we don't do it this way, i.e. the presentation of the art can easily become manipulative, tainting the 'pure' experience of the artwork with the museum's interpretation. But isn’t that inevitable anyway? Crowding many art pieces into a brightly lit room is also influencing our way of viewing it, but this way doesn’t serve the painting at all. Perhaps every painting should be thought of as installation art, and museums should think more about individualizing the presentation of each to fit the art.

A Review of the Actual Writing Itself

Despite some gaps in the logic and some rather repetitive portions towards the middle, it was generally engaging; personal, yet backed up by evidence, and not shying away from the occasional inexplicable mystery. But there were times when I thought he did not delve far enough with some of his conclusions.

A Survey of My Own

I would like to know what paintings you have cried in front of, if any, and (if you can put it into words:) why did you cry?

And if none, then what paintings have moved you closest to tears? And if still none, then what sculptures, photographs, or otherwise non-filmic visual medium has moved you to tears? Please respond in the comments section.

Abe Something says

I enjoyed Elkins' attempt to decode what moves humans to tears when viewing paintings specifically. Paintings do not move, they do not always have immediately clear stories to tell, they are silent - yet they have the power to move us to tears. Well, they used to have that power, or at least they had more power in the past. Elkins traces our emotional engagement with paintings as best he can and attempts to answer why it is that we are far less likely to cry before a painting in the present day. In the end I found myself convinced that I needed a new way of looking at paintings. That I had been doing it wrong to some degree all along. Elkins delivers some very good food for thought, but ultimately does not deliver an concrete answer - I doubt you were expecting one, but I mention just in case.

Really an excellent read. Highly accessible for folks who classify themselves as art historian types. The reading may prove to be a bit of challenge for folks unaccustomed to reading philosophical works.

Below are the notes I took while reading this book. I have not yet edited these notes. BE WARNED: If you have not yet read this book, and do not want to know what Elkins argues, or how he does it, do not read on, as these notes reflect my attempt to track Elkins' argument.

THOUGHTS

The argument: people who cry in front of paintings are responding to some intrinsic element of the painting.

Much like recoiling involuntarily at a gruesome photo or laughing at a painting of drunks at a bar. The image contains the element that elicits the response , as opposed to you are responding to lack of sleep, a bad meal, a personal experience, etc.

Elkins does not support-
Pathetic fallacy theory. We cry because the artwork is so sullen, depressed, or otherwise presenting itself to us in a way that matches our emotional state.

Elkins possibly supports-
Traveling theory. We cry at artworks when we connect to them in a way that transports us to the other side of the viewing experience. When we can see from within the painting and feel the emotions the artist attempted to imbue the work with. Also called transportation theory. The viewer is not dreaming, their eyes are open, yet they return to our world unable to express what came over them and shaken.

In short, traveling theory says the painting is like a bridge to another world, and we cry at what we've found on the other side of the painting, or we cry because we find ourselves stuck on the viewing side unable to cross over.

Best theory so far: we intellectualize our experience with a work of art which prevents us from feeling our pure emotional response. Instead of being moved by color of its own accord we discuss color choice. We discuss composition rather than allow the impact of the arranged elements to strike us fully. We think about the artist's life, politics., the bits of trivia we have at our disposal. The try to understand how the title relates to the mysterious work. We think of everything but ourselves as we have the experience of viewing art. Perhaps this is because we have been brought up in the tradition of not trusting overwhelming emotions, which overtake us, make us irrational, hysterical, incapable of reasoning. And reasoning and rationality are key to the cool critical distance essential we require to 'get' a paintings 'meaning'. We are focused on getting it, not experiencing it. This dulls our emotional response.

We should trust what attracts us and explore that feeling of first contact with a painting. Before we read the wall text, or title, or a book on the work, artist, or otherwise --just make contact and don't think about meaning, place in history, importance, etc.

Pictures/paintings have lost much of their power. We have stories from the past such as St. Catherine becoming paralyzed from the waist down after contemplating the amount if faith one must have in Christ while viewing Giotto's Navicella, or the story of St. Fan is crying for years after viewing a painting of the crucifix. These stories exist because people believed pictures could do these things to people. Call it

superstition if it makes it easier to comprehend, but the fact is people viewed the object of 'painting' differently in the past, they were more reverent. While this thinking begins to align our lack of tears with a vaguely religious sentiment, it also reaffirms the notion that paintings are less likely to move us to tears because we intellectualize our viewing experience. What is the opposite of religion if it is not rational intellectualism? Text books prime us to view paintings in terms of manifestos, schools, gender politics, deconstruction, etc. We are taught to make spiritual connections even with works that were designed to elicit deep spiritual connections. Those paintings are characterized as technically brilliant, and having remarkable stories, but we don't Connect with them. As for modern painting, it doesn't try to connect with us. It is often concerned with itself, its place in the canon, or worse its place in the gallery. Paintings ask us to think about paintings writ large, or about the act of creation or viewing, but less often ask us to think about ourselves.

Final thoughts on Elkins argument:
A summary: Elkins ends his book on the matter of what modernism and postmodernism represent. He posits that the two represent one of two possible worlds. One, in which we are struggling with a complete loss of faith, or at least a debilitating loss of faith, and so our artworks have retreated away from the sentimental and pushed toward the reasonable, the intellectual. Our paintings comment on themselves in an existential sense as opposed to the world writ large, they do not attempt to comment on the grand meaning of things. This is a bygone pastime. Paintings have intellectualized the loss of faith and present us with canvases that are about making art, the artist, the viewer, the act of viewing, etc. These canvasses are empty if you are seeking a meaningful connection.

But Elkins holds that modernism and postmodernism could represent an attempt to hang onto the last threads of romanticism, which struggles with God's absence by seeks to find meaning in that absence. That Pomo canvases are blank, or intellectualized because the artist is looking for meaning in the absence. In this sense a Rothko is deeply spiritual, or meaning making, painter. His canvas is not just a murky color field because he is showing us color or texture- he is inviting us to look deeply into nothing and find ourselves. To make that connection via the absence of clearly identifiable meaning is to admit a longing to find meaning. Postmodern absence of meaning is the last gasp of faith, intellectualized, sure, but not the sign of a world completely without faith in a greater meaning.

Elkins favors the latter here, obviously.

So we cry less often because our artwork requires deeper ways of looking. They allow themselves to appear on the wall as easy to read or to "get", and can work that way. But really looking at them might reveal more. We cry less often today because we have been told how to look and what to look for. Just look deeply and you just might find yourself crying.

Miles Honey says

great engaging nonfiction is a little hard to come by in the realm of theory, but this book is an absolute joy. fascinating and easy to read—i can't walk around museums quite the same way anymore and i'm grateful for that.

Daniel says

Okay I am finally kicking this off my "Currently reading" shelf because I returned this book to the library several months ago and I'm not getting it back anytime soon. "Abandoned," sadly.

So here we have an interesting book about people crying in front of paintings. It's been several months since I looked at this book, so I can't give any real specifics. I got the feeling that the author couldn't really find THAT much to say about the subject, but I can't say why now. There are some really cool and engaging personal anecdotes, and there is a whole section in the back devoted to the letters people wrote Elkins describing these experiences. The last chapter I read was about people's changing tastes in art and how one painting that made people cry when it first premiered no longer has the same effect on people today. The first chapter, about Rothko's chapel, left the best impression on me. There was also an interesting chapter about people fainting and falling ill while looking at paintings. That's all I got. Not a bad book, and if I had more time I would have gladly finished it. Maybe one day.

MOST IMPORTANTLY FOR AN ART BOOK YOU HAD LIKE FIVE PICTURES. COME ON.

Ewa says

This book did some wonderful things to me. It dispelled philosophical dogmas. It validated vague feelings I've had about academia, especially about art history. And, most importantly, it connected me with the stories of fellow weepy art-lovers.

"Pictures and Tears" contains, among other gems, the letters and stories of thirty-odd people who have cried (or wanted to cry) in front of paintings. If you're an art-lover or weepy person – especially if, like me, you're both – go read it. I'm giving it five stars; I want Goodreads to recommend more books like this. And now I'll write a largely critical review… because that's easier.

Elkins turns the question "Why do people cry in front of paintings?" on its head, asking instead: "Why do so many people *fail* to cry in front of paintings?" He spends a chapter discussing the "Stendhal syndrome" – a putative condition in which the sufferer (usually a visitor to an Italian city) is so overwhelmed with art that she becomes physically ill. Elkins brilliantly argues that we should define the complementary "Mark Twain malaise," a hypothetical illness befalling those who fail to have any reactions whatsoever to art (named after a recorded failure on Twain's part to be moved by the Last Supper).

Elkins makes a compelling case that our aesthetic responses fall on a continuum – and that we have no general reason to prefer moderate – or boringly average – responses. He also makes it evident that sometimes expertise can get in the way of raw emotional experience, thus calling into question an assumption common among philosophers: that expertise sets a standard for "best" aesthetic experience.

He also skilfully deflects worries about the "subjectivity" of tears. Several of the stories people sent in involve tears which at first seem to be only about the crier but on closer examination turn out to be a strong reaction to publicly ascertainable features of the painting. In one such story, a woman paints a picture of an empty bed. Her husband doesn't think twice about it, until she has an affair. Then it takes on a harrowing significance, and he weeps.

At first, you might think that his response has nothing to do with the "aesthetic" features of the painting. It doesn't even really matter that the thing which triggered his tears was a painting – if he'd chanced upon his wife's hairclip, he might have dissolved into very similar tears. The painting was just a trigger – or so the thought goes.

Of course, the man's response is a poor metric of the painting's worth. He's in no position to have the sort of "disinterested" response which could be a mark of such worth, and we shouldn't conclude from his tears that he's in front of a harrowing masterpiece. In that sense, his response is "subjective." All the same, the response is hardly defective. In fact, you might argue that he understands the painting in a way in which we're not privileged to. I doubt his wife created the painting for the purposes of disinterested contemplation; instead, it's an expression of a concrete human experience. And the painter's husband has insider information about the significance of this experience; after all, he's part of the story the painting tells. As Elkins points out, any painting of an empty bed is bound to be emotionally charged (and in this way the painting is more than just a hairclip, a trigger for his response) – and our protagonist is uniquely placed to feel a particularly intense version of this emotional charge.

Elkins, then, exorcises dogmas about "the" privileged appreciative attitude towards paintings, whether that attitude be the "disinterested" one, the emotionally average or stable one, or the most theoretically, art-historically informed one. Unfortunately, in the process he succumbs to two equally misguided dogmas. (Both concern the apparently "non-cognitive" nature of tears.) The first is the dogma of the "ivory tower of tearlessness," according to which learning too much art history inevitably covers you with "intellectual armor" preventing you from getting too emotional in front of a painting. Art history not only *can* get in the way of emotional responses; it almost inevitably does. The second, related, dogma is the dogma of the incomprehensibility of tears: while you may be able to understand something about why someone is crying, incomplete comprehensibility is a defining feature of tears. In the remainder of the review, I'll argue that Elkins was wrong to accept these dogmas; they're part of the misguided conceptual package which he rightly discards.

Elkins takes the letters he received to be evidence for the existence of the "ivory tower of tearlessness" – they demonstrate, he thinks, that art historians are overwhelmingly unlikely to be moved by paintings. I'll argue that he bases this conclusion on faulty statistical reasoning.

Take a moment and guess: what percentage of the population has cried over a painting? What percentage has gotten emotional? Elkins estimates that "1 percent of [his] profession have been moved to tears by an artwork, and another 10 percent let themselves get emotional." Is this less than what you guessed the base rate was – or more?

It's more than what I think the base rate is – but my estimate hardly matters, since 1% and 10% are numbers pulled out of a ridiculously improbable hat. In the paragraph immediately preceding the one where Elkins makes this estimate, he tells us that he'd heard from "almost thirty" art historians. Seven said they had cried at paintings (but only two were willing to go on the record). Eleven said they "habitually feel very strongly about art, even though they don't cry." (p. 99)

We have a sample of fewer than 30 art historians. This means that at least 7/30, or 23%, of the art historians Elkins talked to had cried in front of paintings; 11/30, or 37%, feel very strongly about art, i.e. presumably, let themselves get emotional. If the 7 weepy and 11 emotional art historians are all different people (as "even though they don't cry" suggests), then more than 18/30, i.e. 60%, of the art historians he surveyed "let themselves get emotional." (How does this compare to your base rate estimate?) To estimate, as he does, that the emotion-rate in the art historical population is 11%, he would have had to have reason to think his sample

was unbelievably biased towards weepy people.

Now we're later told that "several thousand" saw his survey and didn't respond. This must have led to some selection bias, since you're probably more likely to answer a survey about weeping in front of paintings if you have a good story to tell than if your answer is a dull "no." Even so, the weepiness rate among art historians might well be closer to 25% than to 1%. And I think you'll agree that the general population rate couldn't be higher than that.

So why does Elkins believe, against the evidence, that art history makes you less emotional? He may be noticing that the outliers – the people who admitted to extreme weepiness in their letters – are mostly not art historians. But that's exactly as you'd expect, given that there are extremely few extreme weepers, and vastly fewer art historians than non-historians. An extremely weepy art-lover may be more likely to be an art historian than a random person is – but still much more likely not to be an art historian, given how few art historians there are. To think otherwise is to commit the base rate fallacy.

I know Elkins isn't trying to carry out a randomized controlled trial – but he is trying to draw some broad conclusions from a data set which completely fails to support them (and may in fact support their negations). What I'd like to know now is: how many art historians have wept in front of a math problem?

I think Elkins's letters reveal a troubling trend – but it's a different trend than the one he isolates. There is no ivory tower of tearlessness – but there may be an ivory tower of tear-shaming. As many as 60% of art historians – the silent majority – may feel highly emotional in front of paintings, but most of them seem to believe that art historians aren't supposed to be feeling this way – or, at least, that they should keep quiet about it when they do. That seven out of thirty art historians cried in front of paintings isn't troubling; that five of them refused to have their letters published is. The most tragic character I find in Elkins's book is the art history graduate student who asserts: "You couldn't love a painting. Paintings are intellectual things. It's not normal love." From this perspective, Elkin's belief that art historians are unemotional is part of the problem, not the solution.

The second dogma – the incomprehensibility of tears – reveals that Elkins's exchange of the question "Why do some people cry in front of paintings?" for "Why *don't* others cry?" is only partial. He's still fundamentally a non-weepy person puzzling about weepers. This is revealed in what he finds puzzling: he asks "what could it mean, I wonder, to cry because I *admired* a novel? Could I ever cry because I *regretted* what a fictional character had chosen to do?" *I'm* puzzled by his puzzlement (especially at the second variety of tears).

Elkins's favorite example of tears which don't make sense comes from one of the letters he received, whose author "cried at the Louvre in front of Victory. She had no arms, but she was so tall." He makes a big deal of the "but" here, claiming that there couldn't be a reasonable contrast to be drawn between having no arms and being tall. Now his correspondent ends up agreeing with him that her tears didn't make sense, so I'm on shaky ground here – but so tall/no arms strikes me as a perfectly reasonable contrast to draw. We have a monumental, empty victory which doesn't have arms with which to do things of real, human value. Perhaps her human arms have been replaced by wings – empty, dangerously beautiful ideals. I could go on. Only the weeper knows which story best captures her tears – but there are plenty of perfectly comprehensible stories to choose from.

The two dogmas interact: if tears are utterly mysterious, non-rational things, then knowledge – in particular, art-historical knowledge – is at best irrelevant and at worst damaging to emotional experience. But take the story of the man who cried in front of the painting of an empty bed. His tears weren't the result of an

immediate, non-cognitive experience. He cried, in part, because he had *knowledge* about the painting. Now his knowledge was of a particularly immediate, first-personal kind (he knew not only that the painter had had an affair, but that *his wife* was the painter who had an affair), but it's still a piece of knowledge about the history (art history, even) of the painting. If his wife's painting ended up in an art gallery, my emotions could only benefit from an art historian telling me this story.

A final reason for tears which Elkins finds incomprehensible reveals that he is under the spell of yet another aesthetic dogma: the dogma of the irrelevance of beauty. On the last page, he describes a passionless art-goer (the person you wouldn't want to become if you take tears seriously), saying "The eye is rebuffed by the dim canvas, and keeps falling back into the lazy chair of clichés – "How beautiful," people say without thinking how flat that sounds." Now "it's beautiful" can certainly be a cliché, a vague term of praise for when you don't know what to say. But Elkins is forgetting that many of the protagonists of his story have used the word "beautiful" in a very different emotional register. "I cried because it was so beautiful" is a sentiment which recurs in the letters again and again.

Elkins dismisses this as a comprehensible reason for tears, since "in the art world, beauty is nearly a synonym for pallor. Saying that an artwork is beautiful is a bit like calling someone "nice": it means that stronger, more definite qualities are probably missing." He's revealing his true stripes when he says "in the art world."

The ivory tower of tearlessness is also an ivory tower of beautylessness. And, as with tearlessness, I think the art historians are not a different species from us naïve beauty-lovers – they're just a little more repressed. Those who do admit to crying because of beauty say it with an awareness that they're up to something controversial. Robert Rosenblum is a trifle apologetic: "I have truly gasped (jaw dropped, breath caught, etc.) from the sensation of what I guess we might still call Beauty, or some other kind of magic in art." Tamara Bissell, who bravely countered that poor grad student's contention that you can't fall in love with a painting, said that the Friedrich painting which made her cry "was very quiet and very beautiful." She's defiant: "she said the word "beautiful" very carefully." In the art world I wish we had, she wouldn't have to be defiant.

Beauty, like tears, is nothing to apologize for. There may certainly be more to a tear than beauty – but sometimes "it was so beautiful" really is a complete and satisfactory explanation. Strangely, Elkins accepts "I cried because I felt the presence of God" as a comprehensible explanation – but not "I cried because it was so beautiful." He says of words like "the uncanny" or "the aura" that "each word is a strategy for not quite naming God;" I'm more inclined to think that "God" – a retreat into organized religion – is a strategy for not quite naming beauty.

In one of the letters, a woman cries in a Hungarian gallery. The guard says, "quietly and sympathetically," "szép-szép." "Szép" is the only Hungarian word known by the author of the letter; it means "beautiful." The guard understood something Elkins pretends not to: few things are as comprehensible as tears because of beauty. Just look at this little boy crying because a chihuahua is so beautiful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6r9c...

"Szép-szép:" the sound of tears falling.

Narjes Dorzade says

???? ???? ?? ???_???? ?? ??????_?? ??? ?? ?????

?? ???? ? ?? ?????? ??????? ?? ?? ??? ?? ??? ?? ??...

???? ?????
.
.
?? ???? ????? ??? ??
?? ??? ???
???? ?? ?????
?? ?? ?? ?????? ???????
?? ???? ?? ?? ?????
?????? ?????.

????? ??????

Imane Boulal says

" When I cried in front of those paintings, I also did so in response to the painter’s courage, because I felt the painter…had been out on the edge, held it all together and made it work— and that may be the best explanation of what made me cry. "

Sincerely yours, Helen D.

David Dixon says

Washington City Paper
Arts & Entertainment : Book Review

Lonely Teardrops
By Glenn Dixon • May 24, 2002

The past decade has been a good one for revelatory little books of art writing that really shouldn't have to exist. Dave Hickey reminded the art world that it had stopped talking about beauty. David Batchelor examined the marginalization of color. And now, with "Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings," art historian James Elkins finds his profession to be stocked with iced-down cold fish who have long since ceased to exhibit any signs of life. Not only are academics averse to crying over artworks intended to stir such passions, they also seem unable to experience any feeling whatsoever concerning what have become to them mere objects of study. And they threaten to draw their students into their shrunken domain.

By surveying his colleagues to gather data for his latest book, Elkins, a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, risked furthering a reputation as a rabble-rouser. Among the 400 replies he received were more than a few suggestions that he not pursue the project. "It will close the gates of Harvard to you forever," warned one unnamed correspondent. Then came the strange addendum, "of course, that doesn't mean much anyway." Elkins leaves unexplained whether a Harvard job is no longer the plum it once was or he had already irreparably damaged his Ivy League chances with a string of books--from "Our Beautiful,

Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing" to "Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity"--that, not in so many words, painted art historians as myopic and doctrinaire.

And now freakishly heartless. The seed of "Pictures & Tears" was planted in the classroom, with a discussion of a small show of paintings by Caspar David Friedrich at the Art Institute in 1990. Its installation was radically tendentious by contemporary standards, though not by those of the painter's day: Overall lighting was low, the pictures being illuminated by spotlights, and Schubert impromptus were piped in. Feeling steamrollered by the dramatic trappings, most of Elkins' grad students were fairly merciless in their criticism, but one demurred. Tamara Bissell confessed that she had been profoundly moved: "It was very quiet and very beautiful. I was standing very still. And then I felt something funny. I was just standing there, and all of a sudden tears were streaming down my cheeks. I cried hard, for a while. It was wonderful, really wonderful."

Like the rest of his class, Elkins acted out of professional reflex, judging Bissell's reaction to be uncontrolled and inappropriate. But her conversation-stopper gnawed at him. When he related it to a variety of friends, reactions split along professional lines. Laypersons welcomed her tears; art historians moved to discredit them. "My colleagues thought that Tamara's epiphany was one of two things," Elkins writes, "neither of them especially desirable: either an artificial experience brought on by the theatrical lighting and music, or (even worse) evidence of an overemotional frame of mind."

Elkins extended his inquiries, into the literature and through a broader cross-section of viewers, and he emerged from them with accusatory fingers pointed not at Bissell but at the 20th century--and at art historians. "At a rough guess," he writes, "I would bet that 1 percent of my profession have been moved to tears by an artwork, and another 10 percent let themselves get emotional. The remainder are professionals, in the pejorative sense of that word." Part of the problem is that every discipline seeks to counter the most obvious criticisms of it with clumsy efforts at damage control. So you'll find art historians, worried about the perceived femininenеss of their field, struggling to turn it into a most serious business, dour and pseudoscientific.

Another part of the problem is that tears are both unreliable and somewhat authoritative, offering visible proof of deep feeling even if none is expected or desired or warranted by the material at hand. What are we to make of the tears of the distinguished aesthetician David Carrier? "I am terribly sentimental," he admitted to Elkins, "and I have cried before even rather silly films--the one about the Jamaican bobsled team, for example, much to my daughter's amazement." Elkins also reports, however, that Carrier "probably hasn't cried over a painting."

People uninhibited by temperament or occupation who do cry at paintings tend to do so, Elkins finds, for three main reasons: (1) A painting makes a viewer intensely aware of the passing of time, while simultaneously forestalling its progress; (2) "[s]udden, unexpected, out-of-control presence," basically "a religious feeling," makes a painting feel unbearably full; or (3) "[p]ainful absence--whether it is of God, or grace, or just presence itself" makes a painting feel unbearably empty.

Although this essayistic book doesn't quite do justice to its subtitle, Elkins does relate that crying over other art forms has a history of its own, with tearfulness passing in and out of fashion. "Crying had faded from view in the Renaissance," he writes, "and it began again sometime in the late seventeenth century, in France. The first reports are about women crying when they read novels. Eventually crying spread like an epidemic through western Europe, infecting readers from England to Italy." Tears were up for grabs in the 19th century. Elkins tells of a meeting between Beethoven and Goethe, whose writing had inspired him. When Beethoven's playing moved Goethe to tears, the composer chastised the poet: "'When I read your poetry,' he

is supposed to have said, 'I am inspired to rise to its heights.' Despite his greater age and fame, Goethe stood silently and took the rebuke, perhaps realizing the truth of it." Likewise, writers such as William Wordsworth and Etienne Pivert de Senancour, author of the epistolary autobiographical novel "Obermann" (1804), sought out emotional territory where, as they saw it, tears would not suffice, and as Romanticism proceeded it became even more dry-eyed.

The psychologically obsessed 20th century frequently found room for illness where little could be found for tears. It was only fitting that Florentine psychiatrist Graziella Magherini gave a Freudian spin to the psycho-physiological maladies of art tourists that landed them briefly in her care. Her still-untranslated 1989 book "La Sindrome di Stendhal" named their symptoms for the novelist, who had himself experienced heart palpitations before the treasures of Florence on an 1817 visit. Although briefly controversial, the Stendhal syndrome ultimately bore little professional fruit, perhaps because, as Elkins notes, both sides in the debate were curiously quick to distance themselves from the notion that the art that had triggered the attacks really had made much of a contribution to the patients' pathologies.

In the standard history, modernist and postmodernist art trended toward distanced intellectualization, just as the philosophical currents feeding them had, and tears were left in the dust. Elkins raises another possibility: "[I]n my experience," he writes, "even the most stringent and theoretically informed postmodern painting is suffused with a lingering nostalgia for a time when religion could be named, and tears could be believed, but I can't prove it because the subject--even in this age of apparent freedom of speech--is proscribed."

Although Elkins has a point, he is being coy here. The job of a book like "Pictures & Tears" is precisely to bring proscribed subjects to discussion. What seems more likely is that Elkins can "prove it," but intends to do so in another book, perhaps the forthcoming "Six Stories From the End of Representation, 1975-2002." Throughout the late '90s and on into the present decade, he has set a publication pace better suited to a pulp novelist.

An unfortunate side effect of such prolificacy is unevenly developed writing. A captivating personal history of his experience with Giovanni Bellini's "The Ecstasy of St. Francis"--from his intense boyhood fascination with it, through his many return trips to the Frick to see it, to its withdrawing from him once the "poison pill" of his professional historical training has produced in him "the death of all feeling"--is plotted in great detail. But then the Kamakura-period "Nachi Waterfall," another of the handful of pictures reproduced in color in this underillustrated book, is given short shrift, even though it has inspired a veritable cult of tears among Japanese devotees. Elkins is content to leave it as "a mystery I still haven't solved."

Much about crying is indeed mysterious, but Elkins keeps the crutch of unverbalizability too close at hand. Not infrequently does he retreat well before he has reached the end of a line of investigation. It's an odd failing in a book that seeks, mainly with success, to urge us to look at pictures anew, unreasonably--and unabashed of the emotional consequences.

Picking up on the fact that the process of viewing a fixed image renders painting largely a devotional medium, Elkins writes at length about the intimate late-medieval portraits known as Andachtsbilder, dwelling on a circa-1460 Weeping Madonna by Dieric Bouts in Chicago that he knows well. The program for "How to look and possibly even be moved" in the last chapter of "Pictures & Tears"--including such advice as "minimize distractions," "pay full attention," and "be faithful"--is essentially a secularization of devoted medieval viewing. Elkins intends his eight-step approach as "general advice, for everyone." But he and others like him may already be beyond its reach. "My failure to weep a single certifiable tear for a painting cripples my understanding of some paintings, shutting me off from a fuller response," he laments. "Studying history is like smoking: they're both habits that give us pleasure, but they are very bad for us. One

kills the body, the other the imagination."

Given my position as a nonhistorian who spends a lot of time looking at art and urging others to do likewise, it would seem that some personal testimony is in order. I confess that I don't cry much; welling up is generally as far as I go. And it usually isn't over works of visual art. Music, sure. George Jones can shoot me down out of a clear, blue sky. And one day, when my wife found me waiting for her, as usual, in the Metro parking lot, she immediately knew to ask what was wrong. Nothing, really--only Freeny's Barn Dance Band's "Don't You Remember the Time," a twin-fiddle instrumental recorded 35 years to the day before I was born but seemingly removed by eons, its bittersweet good time forever gone. As for movies, Vittorio De Sica's "Umberto D." got to me, though I felt somewhat manipulated and had expected better of it. For true can't-drive-home devastation, nothing, for me, has topped Terry Zwigoff's depiction of the mulish unanswerability of mental illness in "Crumb."

When I look back at the art writing I've done over the past eight years, I can find many shows and pieces that have moved me, some deeply enough to make me want to holler with joy (Wayne Thiebaud), jump up and down (Lari Pittman), dance (Stuart Davis), break things (Bruce Nauman), and sing hymns of awe (Robert Irwin). I have, of course, done none of these things. Instead, I've sublimated my reactions into print when I had a sympathetic venue, glossed them over when I didn't. I clamped down on my emotions in response to social stigma, particularly while I was still in well-lighted, public places.

But I've noticed a change of late. I had decided I wanted to write about "Pictures & Tears" weeks before I got around to buying it. Just knowing it existed gave me a license I hadn't consciously reckoned I lacked. And, as chance and personal inclination would have it, the last two shows I reviewed before reading the book gave me something to cry about. I agree that viewing art feeds the unsecularizable parts of our minds; I part ways with Elkins, however, over his assumption that it is prolonged, focused looking at an individual work that builds the tension that culminates in tears.

In both cases, with me, it was the cumulative effect of many of an artist's works that took me to the brink. For at least an hour, in which I couldn't bring myself to write a word, I had Steven Cushner's painting show at the University of Maryland to myself. The quietness, the installation, the subject matter, the paint handling, and the light from the canvases, in which dark, glyphic configurations of cords hover over washy fields of radiant color, conspired to carry me toward a nearly textbook example of "crying because time passes." More tangled emotions were at play at the Hirshhorn's H.C. Westermann sculpture retrospective, in which the idiosyncratic visual expression of his handmade wooden constructions dovetailed with established literary modes. Westermann's ability to turn craft into moral rebuke, to invest the quixotic with almost inexpressible fury, while retaining its humor, absolutely tore me to pieces. Days later, I found myself choking up whenever I simply thought about the show.

Each time, though, I looked away, held back, composed myself, and went about my business. Now that I've read him, Elkins makes me wish I hadn't been so wary. CP