

## Letter From Los Angeles

# The View From The Top: Dreary

## *Smaller Collections Outshine the Getty*

By JO ANN LEWIS  
Special to *The Washington Post*

LOS ANGELES

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Not to mention wet.

It isn't supposed to rain on this billion-dollar culture bunker, this megalomaniacal monolith of off-white metal squares, glass squares, travertine squares and the occasional curved grid visible for miles around from its site on a Santa Monica hillside.

But it did rain, and the downpour left many of the 200 female art professionals attending a national conference here early this month with an impression markedly different from that reported by much of the press following the center's sunny opening in December.

Without sun, the Getty Center is a cold, confusing, even disorienting array of relentlessly stark, faceless, undistinguishable modern buildings. They look so much alike, in fact, that it takes hours to figure out where you are in

relation to, say, the tram station (where you landed from the parking garage below), or the meeting center; the eating center; the information, education and conservation centers and—ah, yes—the J. Paul Getty Art Museum, which I most wanted to see.

It's not that the Getty's welcoming staff didn't tend to our every need. Huge rubber trash bins filled with umbrellas were frantically wheeled from door to door to keep us from getting drenched as we dashed from one building to the next. But finally, after slogging our way to the museum's entrance building, it was soon clear that the rain wasn't the Getty's only problem.

The entrance to the J. Paul Getty Museum is a gargantuan, train station-like pavilion featuring information and Acoustiguide rental booths, along with the first work of art we'd seen all day: an ancient Roman nude marble Zeus who seemed lost in the soggy throng. After a greeting by Getty Museum Director John Walsh, we were left to navigate

See LOS ANGELES, C9, Col. 1

the galleries on our own. It was then that the real trouble began.

First, the museum's entrance pavilion is utterly mute on the subject of where a visitor should go next, unless you're willing to climb one of the forbidding stairways that appear to go nowhere. There are free handouts with ground plans, but no other clue—not even signage—that would help you track down, for instance, the ancient marbles, medieval manuscripts, Renaissance paintings or 20th-century photographs.

Pressed for viewing time, we fanned out to take random samplings of the collections, passing word about our findings to others along the way. Given the downpour, I systematically headed for the nearest building, never knowing till I got there and read the sign on the door what I'd see inside.

Eventually, I began to get the drift: Each of these buildings, or clusters of buildings (some attached by walkways, others not) displayed everything but paintings on the ground floor—ancient sculpture, old glass, master drawings, etc. And the paintings galleries were all upstairs, under skylights, where they could bask in the natural light. Except that on this particular day, there was very little light. Nor was there enough supplementary light to keep many galleries from being shrouded in gloom.

In fairness, it must be said that certain aspects of the collection have expanded admirably in recent years, notably the medieval manuscripts and photography collections, which now have few American peers. But while the Getty has acquired important and expensive paintings, the quality and authority of the collection is still badly diluted by the inclusion of many second-rate works. The dimly lighted gallery devoted to Rembrandt and his circle, for example, doesn't come close to telling us why we should love Rembrandt or what made him great.

There's also another serious and pervasive problem here: insultingly simple-minded labels that serve only to expose the Getty's muddled attitude toward its public. Eager to be seen as relevant rather than elitist or overly art-historical, the Getty has apparently decided to solve the matter by talking down. For instance: Does it really enhance our experience to read that drawings in the collection are "works done on paper"? The Getty, mind you, has its own Getty Education Institute for the Arts, which presumably dispenses knowledge. They'd do well to give their label writers a grant and send them to Washington, where they can learn how it's done at the National Gallery and other national museums.

That goes double for installation and lighting departments. Unfortunately, it's too late to improve the taste of the museum officials who approved the hideous 18th-century French decorative arts installations.

By late afternoon, as our day at the Getty drew to a close, the rain had stopped. So I set out to walk around outside, where sunlight now sparkled off overflowing fountains and puddled travertine. Below one of the bridgelike walkways, a low-lying cloud masked the freeway, giving the place the feel of a floating Shangri-La. What a great place to study, or write a book on courtesy of one of their big fat grants, I thought. The same thought crossed many a colleague's mind that day.

I began to ponder the scant dimensions of the eccentric, nearly forgotten oil man monumentalized by this great pile: a man so stingy that he wouldn't pay the ransom to get his grandson back until kidnappers cut off the boy's ear and delivered it in a box.

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Fortunately, I saw several other art sights in Los Angeles that offered everything that was missing at the Getty, with passion at the top of the list.

There were: a great contemporary house by Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta, the private art collections of Michael Ovitz and Peter Norton, and—best of all—a wonderful, little-known establishment called the Museum of Jurassic Technology.

Stylistically, the domestic masterpiece Legoretta designed for Arthur and Audrey Greenberg in Brentwood is as unlike Richard Meier's rigid Getty geometries as it could be (though, admittedly, so was his assignment). Built in the Mexican style, with high stucco walls facing the street, the house embraces you within, imposing a sense of calm and refuge. There is complexity as well, as Legoretta sets mists of color afloat by masterfully beaming light onto a bright yellow wall, or onto lapis shutters. There is no color in the Getty's anhedonic, sensually deprived world. I'd forgotten how good it can make you feel.

Proof that big L.A. money and good taste can creatively coexist came, of all places, at the home of Hollywood super-agent Ovitz, who lives in a disconcertingly modest red-brick pillared house not far from O.J. Simpson's former place in Brentwood. What Ovitz has, and the Getty lacks, is what appears to be a real passion for art, which he transmits in the way he treats it. His very lived-in living room, for instance, is a wonderfully harmonious combination of Chinese Ming furniture, Rembrandt etchings and important 20th-century paintings by Picasso and Dubuffet, all

blended together in a way that makes them resonate. Ovitz wakes up to the bright green throb of a fan-shaped abstraction by Ellsworth Kelly. And he comes home to a small, sweet sculpture by his cousin Joel Shapiro at the front door.

Admittedly, there is the whiff of a heavy-handed 1980s dealer lurking behind some of Ovitz's paintings, especially the dated-looking works by Julian Schnabel and David Salle, now abandoned to the gallery wing, which Ovitz added. There is also a jaw dropper in this collection—Jasper Johns's "White Flag," brought back from Japan last year and now hanging in the den, alongside a Rauschenberg combine and an early de Kooning. But throughout, even when you smell a big investment, there is the sense of art truly loved, lived with and understood.

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But the most unforgettable experience I had in Los Angeles was at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a little-known storefront enterprise in the Culver City area that my daughter tipped me off to. A hand-to-mouth operation founded by artist-filmmaker David Wilson, it survives on admission fees, sales from its tiny shop painted black (like the rest of its labyrinth of galleries), and sporadic

grants from the NEA and the Andy Warhol Foundation. Yet it accomplishes everything the Getty fails to do: It fills you with wonder, and it makes you think.

It's not an easy place to describe. But it recalls the Smithsonian's gem hall: a darkened space with small display cabinets showing objects of wonder and scientific curiosity. Except here, we are shown the Cameroonian stink ant, a horn from the back of an Englishwoman's head, and a cutaway scale model of Noah's Ark. The presentation is so convincing, with its labels and esoteric footnotes, its little dioramas and audio spiels, that it takes some time before you sense that something is amiss. Is this stuff based on fact? Or is it the invention of an installation artist? It turns out to be a bit of both.

The most recent exhibition is "Selected Collections From Los Angeles Area Mobile Home and Trailer Parks," a hilarious but bittersweet takeoff on loan shows from private collectors, now a staple in art museums. The room is centered with sleek, vaguely coffin-shaped vitrines filled with everything from expensive china teacups to handmade lace underwear. There is also a subsection on trailer park disasters. You decide whether the artist is kidding or not.

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