

ART & ATTENTION

Nothing You Look At Is an Accident

Cathedrals, shop windows, and what they teach us to value.



Street tabernacle between shopfronts. Photograph © Angela McCormack, Florence, December 2025.

We lower our voices in cathedrals. Nobody asks us to.

THE ESSAY

Why Do We Whisper in Cathedrals?

I have spent much of my life teaching people to look at art, and increasingly I find myself thinking about the ways we are taught to look when there is no artwork in front of us at all.

Walk into a cathedral and something happens before you have decided anything at all. Voices lower, movement slows, and the eye travels differently, often upwards before settling on the images and details around us. Nobody hands you a set of instructions at the door. Whatever your personal relationship with religion might be, the building has already told you that you have entered somewhere in which attention is expected.



St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. Photograph © Angela McCormack, Rome, December 2025.

Most of the people around me in St Peter's had not come to pray. They had come to look, and to photograph, and to queue for an hour in the cold to do both. Whatever was making them lower their voices and slow their step, it was not religious belief, and the behaviour held all the same.

One explanation is that cathedrals have quietly become museums, although I suspect something more interesting is happening. A cathedral was never only a place of worship. It was also the largest and most expensive thing a city ever built, paid for by guilds, banking families, popes and bishops who wanted their names attached to it, and designed by architects, sculptors and painters who knew precisely how height, gold and coloured light act on somebody walking in from an ordinary street. Awe was part of the commission. So the visitor photographing an altarpiece today may be doing something much closer to the original purpose than we like to admit.

The architecture is still doing its job. Scale creates a sense of importance, columns and arches guide us through the building, light draws the eye towards particular places, and precious materials distinguish the exceptional from the ordinary. All of this reaches us well before we understand the subject of an altarpiece, or know anything about the artists who made it, so that by the time we begin to look properly, we have already been told what deserves our attention.

None of which would trouble me particularly, if I had not started noticing the same arrangement somewhere else entirely.

The setting around an object is never entirely neutral.

Can you remember the last time you saw a single handbag given an entire window? Not a shelf of them, and not a row, but one bag, raised on a stand, with half a metre of empty space on either side and a light pointed at it from above.

If you stand outside a luxury boutique for a moment, you can feel your own body answering it. You slow down, and you stop further back than you need to, at the distance the glass has chosen rather than the one you would have chosen. Your eyes lift, because the bag has been placed slightly above your eyeline. Your hands stay by your sides, since there is plainly nothing here you are invited to pick up. If you go inside, you will lower your voice, and so will the person who comes over to greet you.

Nobody asked you to do any of that, in exactly the way nobody asked you to do it in the cathedral.

These are the same methods, used for a different purpose. Isolation, light, scale, empty space and beautiful materials, arranged by people who understand precisely what they are doing, because luxury retail has become exceptionally good at directing our attention, although art has been doing it for centuries.



A hotel room in Manhattan, dressing for a friend's fiftieth. I hung these things up without once thinking of it as a display, and only noticed afterwards that I had used the same language as the windows I had been photographing all week: one object, isolated, given space and light. Photograph © Angela McCormack, New York, January 2026.



Patek Philippe at Fratelli Piccini, Ponte Vecchio. Photograph © Angela McCormack, Florence, 19 December 2025.

My son had already spent hours with me in the Vatican Museums, looking properly and in no hurry, which is why I was so interested to watch him stop at a watchmaker's window on the Ponte Vecchio and give it precisely the same attention. He would tell you that he simply likes beautiful watches, and he does. Standing beside him on the bridge, though, I realised I had been watching the same thing happen all week, in churches and museums and shop windows, without once noticing that it was the same thing.

This is where the comparison becomes more interesting. If light, space, scarcity and beautiful materials can make an object feel important, then the feeling is not proof that it is. It is something we have been taught, by architects and altarpiece painters, by curators and jewellers and the people who dress windows for a living, and mostly without noticing that we were being taught anything at all.

None of which is a reason to be cynical, and you do not need to stop enjoying beautiful things. It only means that when something stops you in the street, it is worth asking who arranged it, and what they were hoping you would feel. That is a habit rather than a talent, and it can be practised.

VISUAL LITERACY

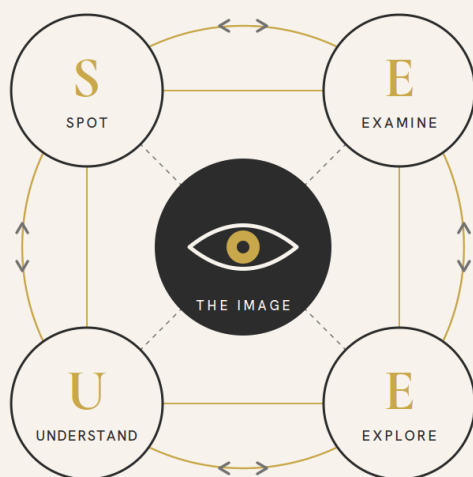
Try It This Week

SEEU™ is the visual thinking method I developed to help us slow down and look more carefully. Rather than following a checklist, the four elements work together, so that each new observation deepens our understanding and sends us back to notice something we had missed.

This time, use it outside the gallery, on the first shop window that stops you in the street. The window below is a good place to practise. Because the four elements work together rather than in sequence, we will begin with Examine this time and see where it takes us.

The SEEU™ Method

FOUR LENSES FOR READING ANY IMAGE



Braccialini, Ponte Vecchio. Photograph © Angela McCormack, Florence, December 2025.

EXAMINE. Notice how few bags there are, and how much room each one has been given. Some sit at eye level, others glow inside their own circles of light, while the walls are white and the marble is cool and expensive. Can you touch any of it, or has glass created a physical distance between you and everything inside?

SPOT. Now step back from the detail. What had actually caught your eye first, before you began working out why? The lit name above the window, the bags raised on their stands, the small circles of light behind them, or the amount of empty floor?

EXPLORE. The name appears twice, lit above the window and again in illuminated letters standing on the floor, with a second, older family name printed beneath the first. What is that repetition doing, and who is it speaking to?

UNDERSTAND. Nothing in this window tells you what anything costs. Look again at the marble, the empty floor and the single rose set into the wall, and ask what you were told instead, and how much of it reached you before you knew a single fact about the house.

Visual literacy is not simply about learning the vocabulary of art. It is about becoming more conscious of how we are being asked to look, which turns out to be a slower and more interesting business than I expected when I started photographing shop windows.

SEEU™ is the framework behind Understanding Art's workshops and resources. More at understandingart.com.au.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Inside the Second Journal



The most carefully lit object in the frame, and nobody designed the lighting. Photograph © Adrian Brown, Swiss Alps, December 2025.

While I was writing this, I kept discovering that the story would not stay in Florence. It followed me to Barcelona, to New York, into a football stadium in Lyon of all places, and eventually to a question I had not expected to be asking at all.

The next Journal follows that trail.

It also follows the strangest detail I found. The handbag I carried through all of it is made by a Swiss house that runs an art foundation, in a villa on Lake Lugano built in the 1930s by a Parisian dancer who wanted her own Petit Trianon. Which leaves me with a question I have not answered yet, and rather want to: why do luxury houses collect art, and what exactly are they buying?

The Journal goes to subscribers first.

A selection of the photographs in this series will be offered as fine art prints through understandingart.com.au later this year. Subscribers will hear about them first.

All text © Angela McCormack. Photographs © Angela McCormack except where otherwise credited. Please feel free to share this issue in full. If you would like to reproduce an individual photograph, just ask.

If this made you look twice, send it to someone who has ever stopped at a shop window without knowing why. If it found its way to you, you can subscribe at understandingart.substack.com.