

100 Great Works In Focus

By Sebastian Smee Feb. 24, 2022



Joan Semmel Sunlight, 1978 ,Oil on canvas.

One of the great things about pictures is that they make no demands on you. You can look as long as you like and walk away at any time. There's a freedom in this arrangement that I love. I know people who go to museums to look at a single painting. That might seem a bit perverse, given all that's on offer. But, in a sense, I try to enact a version of this same, focused impulse in my Great Works, In Focus column. I'm saying, "Hey, let's look at this one thing."

I don't write these pieces to educate Post readers. I wouldn't presume. I write them for pleasure. It's that simple. "Pleasure," wrote W.H. Auden, "is by no means an infallible critical guide, but it is the least fallible."

I'm lucky on two counts: that enough people seem to get pleasure from reading them to make continuing worthwhile and that my subject — great works of art in America's public museums — is pretty much inexhaustible.

If you learn something from them, great; we're learning together. But what interests me more is finding ways to express (without, I hope, gushing, without patronizing, without intruding too much on your time) my passion for this stuff. My hope is that doing so might occasionally ignite similar excitement in you.