

# THE GIFT OF ART

## *Of questions asked, and answered*

By Anca Colbert

Questions — I like asking them, of others and of myself.

Pondering why and how art matters in individual lives has been somewhat of an obsession in my own life, personal and professional.

There is no doubt that art affects lives, individually and collectively.

Tales and theories abound about how the physical experience of art deepens our spiritual experience of life, about the power of art to expand our awareness and to connect an individual to a greater/more significant perception of reality/meaning.

Can a poem transform a life?

Can a melody bring you or me to tears and elevate our soul?

Can one scene from a film trigger emotional awareness?

Can architecture propel us into action?

Can a painting give you shivers and inspire real change?

The answer to these questions, is YES - I believe they can.

I know they do.

So I decided to invite a few friends from Ojai to recall their own personal experiences of such “aha” moments in their life. Each of them is an accomplished, multi-talented individual, familiar with the creative process, its practice and its mystery. Let’s then listen to them tell us about one memory from the other side of the art phenomenon, of how it felt to experience the electric energy of art “move” through their body and being.

**Artist, Writer  
Kristina Grey**

“One day, I found myself upset over a misunderstanding with a friend, sticking to my position and finding fault with hers. While on an errand, Leonard Cohen’s ‘Anthem’ began to play on my car radio:

*There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.*

I breathed in the melody and lyrics, my thoughts disengaged, heart opened, and eyes welled with tears as the music washed over my mind, soul and body. Armor in pieces, my imperfection stood naked before me. I smiled as compassion for our human condition filled me. Leonard had reminded me of the truth. I knew what I had to do. Just then, the sun appeared from behind a cloud.

Thank you, Leonard Cohen!”



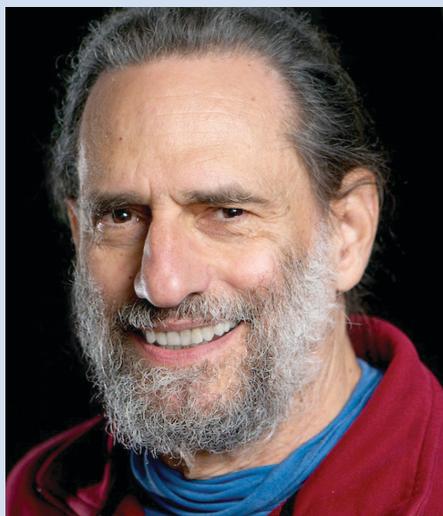
**Artist, Author and Educator  
Bernadette DiPietro**

“In 1996 during my travels through Europe I was moved to tears as I appeared to shrink by the magnificent scale and architecture of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Overwhelmed by Michelangelo’s “Pietà,” the 45 altars and chapels, travertine statues, the marble, the gilding, and Bernini’s bronzes, I stood among this beauty that took over 100 years to build and could not speak as tears rolled down my face.”

**Filmmaker, Founder  
Ojai Film Festival  
Steve Grumette**

“By age seventeen, I’d stopped going to the movies. The adventures and mysteries I’d previously enjoyed had started to seem silly, and Hollywood dramas struck me as contrived, melodramatic and sentimental. Then, one day, I attended a revival screening of a 1953 prize-winning French film called “The Wages of Fear.”

Four impoverished men in a Venezuelan village agree to drive two truckloads of nitroglycerine over bumpy roads to an oil field where it was needed to extinguish a huge fire. Billed as a “thriller,” the film far transcended that description. The characters were real people who displayed genuine human emotions I had never seen



portrayed in a Hollywood movie.

In one scene, the men used nitroglycerine to blow up a large boulder blocking the road. After the explosion,

one man is missing. His buddy is panic-stricken, thinking his friend has been killed. A few seconds later, however, the man appears from behind a pile of rocks, smiling and unhurt. At that moment I said to myself: If this movie is really as good as it seems, those two men will embrace and kiss each other. And to my astonishment and delight, that’s exactly what they did!

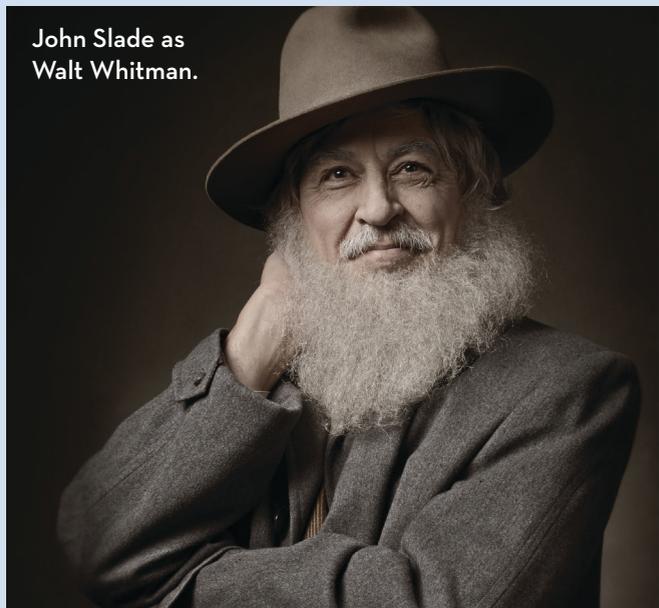
That film, and especially that moment, was a revelation to me. I realized that films needn’t be mere escapist entertainment, but rather, like literature, could occasionally rise to the level of genuine art.

I decided then that I wanted to become a filmmaker, or at least, devote a good part of my life to promoting the motion picture medium as a tool for exploring the human condition. And that’s what I’ve tried to do ever since.”

**Actor, Director and Teacher  
John Slade**

“When I was very little – kindergarten maybe, and continuing all the way through junior high school – I had a sense that people were like ants. Kids scurried to school, grown-ups scurried to work, we all had our projects, our distractions, our pet peeves, but no one seemed to stop and think about what it all meant. I was just another ant in an infinite ant hill.

Then one day, in ninth grade, I read a play by Thornton Wilder called “Our Town.” It was about ordinary antlike people doing ordinary antlike things, but somehow the playwright made me feel I was viewing life through the patient, loving eyes of ... well, not God maybe, but someone very ancient and wise. Suddenly I felt surprised by joy, imbued with secret knowledge, and grateful for a mom who made me breakfast, grateful for new shoelaces and clean shoes to put them in, grateful for my tree hut in the back yard. Art had shown my soul its worth.”



John Slade as  
Walt Whitman.



Leah Partridge  
in the role of  
Lakmé. Photo  
by Deborah  
Gray Mitchell.

As for me, the earliest such conscious memory goes back to the time when my parents first took me to a live opera performance. It was in Bucharest. I was about 5 or 6 years old, and knew it was a special occasion because my mom had gotten me a fancy new dress and white patent leather shoes. In those days people still dressed-up to go to the opera. The opera was “Lakmé.” As Lakmé sang the famous Bell Song, I felt electrified. Of course I did not understand the whole story, but I walked away transfixed, asking my parents: How can she cry, be in such despair, and yet sing so beautifully?

It was a mystery, and a revelation. Back at the house, I kept singing the aria running around, and wanted to go back to the opera and hear it again and again. Years later, as a teenager in Paris, I also kept going back to the Musée de L’Orangerie after discovering Bonnard’s work and my fascination with light and reflections in painting; still later, I kept returning to the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. to feel again the overwhelming sensation of spiritual calm in the presence of their Rothkos. Each visit different. Each deepening and amplifying that first electric experience.

Does art have the power to transform, illuminate and elevate the human condition? Yes, of course. Does it also inspire and motivate us into action? Yes, it can.

As I consider the many occasions when I have felt the power of art run through me, or witnessed its unaccountable effect on others, I count my blessings and stand in awe of its immeasurable gifts. ☺

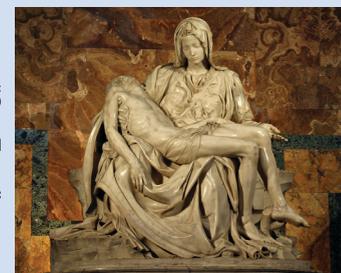
What art offers is  
space - a certain  
breathing room  
for the spirit.  
— John Updike



“Wages of Fear”



“Our Town”



“La Pietà”