Postscript: A Note on the Painting

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The featured image is *The Allegory of Sight* (1617) by Flemish masters Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens. It is one of five paintings in a series titled *The Five Senses*, all housed at the Prado Museum in Madrid. The cover of this journal only captures a portion of the painting: the full work depicts the interior of a vast room typically described in art as a "cabinet of curiosities." These cabinets were often included in the homes of wealthy families and royalty, and they became a popular topic to paint for their ability to showcase an array of items from different parts of the world and from different cultures in one location. For those who could not see such wonders in person, these paintings sufficed. These cabinets held many objects and antiques, including art, scientific tools, furniture, animals, flowers, plants, jewelry, money, maps, tapestries, clothing, and everything in between.

The woman in the painting is the goddess Venus, accompanied by Cupid holding up a painting. The painting on which her gaze is fixed is "The Healing of the Blind Man," which depicts a scene from the Gospels (John 9: 1-12) where Jesus gives sight to a blind man from Siloam. The small painting is similar in composition to the paintings by Sebastiano Ricci (c. 1712-1716) or El Greco (c. 1567) of the same subject. The painting is anachronistic, moreover: a Roman goddess is viewing a painting about Christ, almost as though she were viewing a painting of an action that took place in the past. The painting is also mythical, however, in the sense that both Venus and Christ are figures from art and history that are commonly depicted as indicative of a tradition or an ideal. Venus represents love and beauty; Jesus represents hope and salvation.

Amidst this room full of curiosities—accumulations from history and cultures—what is the only thing that captures Venus? This painting. The sensory overload we might get from first viewing *The Allegory of Sight* is placated when we see Venus lost in thought with one painting as the object of her fixation. We might ask ourselves, then, what is the allegory? The story of the healing of the blind man is itself allegorical, after all. Most likely, the message lies in this story. In the Bible, the story of this man who was born blind but healed is meant to parallel the nature of faith as something one comes to possess upon encountering God as the "light of the world."

Anyone in Brueghel's time would have been familiar with this Biblical story, but besides its more overtly religious significance we can also expand the message of his painting. Amidst all the material distractions around us, from history and our present day, there are special objects—such as a painting—that convey the parables necessary to make sense

of the world. We can extend this message further, to describe the purpose of cultural history: historical study, with all its "curiosities", is meaningless unless we, like Venus, have our sight fixed on an overarching reason for our interest in studying them, something Burckhardt and Huizinga understood. "The Healing of the Blind Man" represents a compass of perspective that guides our reason for studying such peculiar things as those that pique our respective interests as scholars, students, and—most importantly—readers of history. It is the hermeneutic that grants understanding in the original meaning of the word as *standing upon* and *among* these objects we study. The purpose of cultural history is not for us to get lost in this palace of time, though it does invite us to wander its halls for some time. The reason for our time dwelling in the past is to use these artefacts of our civilization to seek, through contemplation and sympathy, the sources of meaning that depict our world as something whole, connected, and therefore purposeful.