

A pilgrimage to works of art that enrich the soul.

Many famous art galleries throughout the world attract millions annually to see the masterpieces they house and rightly so, yet there is a rewarding alternative for lovers of travel and visual beauty; we might call it the road less travelled to works of wonder.

In the small town of Reggio di Calabria in southernmost Italy stand two magnificent warriors that leave the observer awestruck, they are known as the Riace Bronzes. These astonishing statues were discovered by pure chance by a holidaying spear fisherman off the coast of Riace in August 1972. Cast around 450 BCE, these larger than life nude figures are priceless additions to the worlds surviving masterpieces of ancient Greek sculpture. There is something very special about these warriors - the sheer authority of their dignified heroic countenance is numbing. With eyes inlaid with bone and glass, silver teeth and copper lips and nipples, these warriors are the zenith of male physical power and idealized perfection; muscles, veins and sinews are sensitively depicted with loving care. The name of the creator of the Riace Bronzes is forever lost in the endless cycle of time - a fact that makes the experience of seeing them even more humbling.

The hamlet of Isenheim in the Alsace may not often feature on the itineraries of those touring Europe, yet its name is forever linked with a key work in the history of art: The Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald. Originally created for St. Anthony's monastery in Isenheim, The Isenheim Altarpiece can now be seen at the Unterlinden Museum in the nearby town of Colmar.

Completed in 1515, Grunewald's masterpiece is a work of such disturbing intensity that some have found it impossible to gaze upon it for long. With its double -folding panel structure, there are three views to the altarpiece: with wings closed we see the Crucifixion, with wings opened we see three scenes, the Annunciation, Madonna and Child and the Resurrection.

The third view with wings further opened shows St. Paul and St. Anthony in the desert and the Temptation of St. Anthony. The crucifixion scene, devoid of all romanticism and sentimentality, is one of the most powerful and heart-rendering images of renaissance era art. The cross is made of two simple logs. The crown of thorns is made of rough, skin-piercing brambles. Blood flows from Christ's tortured body. The grief of the small group of witnesses is palpable. When the panels unfold, we are left with the image of what is perhaps the most remarkable resurrection scene in the long history of Christian art.

You don't have to be deeply religious to find art a religious experience in the broader sense, as many visitors to The Rothko Chapel in Houston will testify. Mark Rothko's classic later body of abstract work (maybe 'non-representational work' would be a better expression) are astonishingly eloquent in their lyrical simplicity where the subtly of color and crucial scale and tone of the relationships of those soft-edged colour panels are a source of profound and inexplicably moving calm. The Rothko Chapel, 'a sacred place, open to all, every day', is a sanctuary which respects the integrity of each religion and denomination. Mark Rothko never lived to see The Rothko Chapel completed; the chapel was opened in February 1971, a year after his death.

The above are just three of the many magnificent works of art that require us to detour from life's more predictable route in order to experience them - but what would life be if there were no new paths to take and be enriched by?

As Mark Rothko himself said, "I wanted to paint both the finite and the infinite. I was always looking for something more."