

The Wisdom Group and the Chair That Waited

A Short Story Based on the Event “That Order Which Is Art”

The museum was quiet in the way only morning museums can be—soft-shoes visitors gliding between paintings, walls humming with invisible intention. I arrived early, not quite knowing what to expect. A writing class in a museum? That sounded like a field trip dreamed up by someone who believed in time travel and slow thoughts. I was in.

We gathered in the Modern Art gallery first. Everyone sat in a loose crescent—mostly women, adults with lives that felt like they’d lived a few lifetimes more than mine. Some had silver hair and soft scarves, others carried the kind of relaxed freedom that comes from not checking your phone every three minutes. There were writers, wanderers, retirees, and possibly an architect or two. I sat in the front, facing six small Joseph Cornell boxes suspended behind glass.

Cornell’s boxes are strange, lovely things—like secrets kept in old drawers. I picked one with a swan and feathers. It lay flat, unlike the others that reached up like towers. I imagined myself tiny enough to curl inside, breathing in the softness of the feathers, floating upward with the lightness of a dream. Something about it whispered lullabies, the kind that played in music boxes before sleep, back when the world was small and magic felt real.

And then came *her*.

An older woman, sharp eyes and sharper words, stood up with no warning. “I’m not writing anything,” she said to the group, to the museum, maybe to the swan in my box. “These don’t speak to me. I don’t understand them. How do we even define art?”

It was like someone threw a pebble into the still water of the gallery. A pause spread across the group—some uncomfortable, some quietly thrilled. The guide didn’t push back. She just nodded, as if even dissent could be a form of participation. The woman left soon after. I watched her wander off alone, standing silently before a painting of a fireplace far away from the Cornell cases. I thought about following her, asking what she saw there that she didn’t see here. But something about her solitude felt like part of her statement.

Later, in the Architecture and Design gallery, we scattered. This time, we were each to find a design object and write in its presence. I gravitated immediately to the Barcelona Chair, sleek and stoic in its low-slung elegance. As fate—or maybe furniture—would have it, two seniors joined me in choosing the same piece. An elegant woman in a beige coat, and a soft-spoken man with a gentle smile. We sat in our own corners like members of a secret society. I called us, in my head, the *Wisdom Group*.

The gallery was less of a room and more of a gentle maze—sculptures, photos, old cameras, glowing screens. The museum guide wandered among us, reading aloud the prompt for the next writing task. Sometimes I could hear her clearly; other times her voice floated in from somewhere unseen. It felt like being in a forest where the trees whispered things you couldn't quite trace. The voice became a presence in itself, like a ribbon tying us together from afar.

I stared at the chair. It was quiet. So quiet, in fact, that I began to imagine it had feelings.

*Barcelona Chair is a little bit sad,
he's sitting here all day,
but the weird guy doesn't talk to him.*

Right beside the chair was a sculpture—something strange and shiny, perched on a pedestal like it knew it was being watched. It wasn't trying to be elegant. It was loud, bold, proud of its asymmetry. I imagined the chair watching it day after day, whispering, *I was once the future, too.*

*It seems that guy got a higher place, a stage,
with proud, delicate metal frames,
but the Barcelona Chair—
he tries his best to stay, elegantly.*

The elegant woman beside me (a real one, not imaginary like the chair) told me she lived just a few blocks away—in a building designed by Mies van der Rohe himself. I nearly gasped. “He designed the Pavilion in Barcelona,” I said, as if she didn't know. “That's my favorite piece of architecture in the world.” She smiled. “Then you and this chair were meant to meet.”

We all wrote in near silence after that, but something about the space—the way we were apart but connected by shared purpose—felt like a kind of music. The building wasn't just holding the art. It was part of it. The light, the echo, the invisible presence of each other—it all became part of the writing.

When the session ended, I didn't want to leave. Not because I hadn't finished, but because it felt like I had *started* something. A new way of noticing. A slower way of thinking. A deeper kind of seeing.

And maybe that's what art really is—not just the object, but the way it rearranges something inside you. The way it invites you to sit with it, silently, like a chair in the corner of a room. Waiting. Elegant. Still speaking.

Artistic Statement

This short story is based on my experience attending the Art Institute of Chicago's event "*Writing Class: That Order Which Is Art*"—a two-part workshop that invited participants to engage with artworks through creative writing. While the narrative has been shaped with a touch of poetic license, all the characters, spaces, and emotions are drawn from real moments.

Rather than writing a standard event summary, I chose to tell the story as it unfolded in my memory: impressionistic, curious, and filled with small epiphanies. I wanted to highlight the spatial dynamics, the intergenerational atmosphere, and the deeply human interactions that occurred alongside the artworks themselves. This piece blends lived observation with imagined dialogue, in the spirit of ekphrasis and intermediality—transforming visual and spatial experiences into literary form.

In doing so, I hope to reflect not just on what I saw, but on how we experience art collectively and personally—how a chair can become a character, how a stranger's interruption can shift a room, and how writing can bridge the seen and the felt. This story is my attempt to honor that layered experience with lightness, wonder, and quiet reverence.



Barcelona Chair, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1929. Displayed in the Architecture and Design Gallery (Gallery 285) at the Art Institute of Chicago (The chair displayed on the middle left of the photo).