Philippe de Montebello and Martin Gayford, *Rendez-vous with Art*, Thames and Hudson, 2014

Martin Gayford, who is one of our more thoughtful and intelligent critics, has recently developed a very successful by-line in which he talks to artists and records their conversation. First was *Man with a Blue Scarf*, his book about sitting to Lucian Freud, then *David Hockney: A Bigger Message*, published to coincide with Hockney's Royal Academy exhibition. Both were made possible by his friendship with the artists, his empathy with them and his interest in what they had to say. The success of this formula, easy on the reader, has encouraged his publishers with the idea that he might engage in a long conversation with Philippe de Montebello, the extremely distinguished, former Director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, who served there for thirty-one years, which makes him, according to Wikipedia, the longest-serving Museum Director in the world, although he is modest enough to point out that Irina Antonova served for fifty-two years as Director of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow (and both Nick Serota and Neil MacGregor are coming up for thirty years).

In theory, this was a good idea. Nothing is ostensibly more straightforward, but in practice more difficult, than describing the experience of looking at art. What could be a better introduction to its enjoyment than asking two seasoned enthusiasts, who have been professionally looking at and, in Gayford's case, writing about paintings all their lives, to travel round Europe's great museums and engage one another in discussion about the merits of what they see.

This is the theory. But in practice, the model works less well with a museum professional than an artist. Artists almost invariably have interesting, unexpected and left-field views of art, based on the fact that they have spent their lives looking and thinking about paintings for their own purposes, without regard for what other people might think about their views. De Montebello was trained as an art historian in Harvard in the late 1950s and then spent nearly the whole of his life at the Met apart from a very short interlude as Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Unfortunately, working in a great museum does not encourage deep reflection or unorthodox views. De Montebello was an outstandingly successful Director precisely because his views were closely aligned to those of his curators, donors and Trustees. He was required by the institution he served so well to curb any desire he might have had, if ever, to deviate.

The nature of De Montebello's tastes is evident throughout, but especially so when they visit the Wallace Collection. He loves it for its *ancien regime* style. 'I agree with Leo von Klenze…who believed grand décor to be best suited for grand art'. He laments how 'the aristocratic nature of art tends to be lost in today's open and less class-conscious society'. He ventures an opinion about the display of Sèvres porcelain, 'Oddly, I find that individually, Sèvres porcelain can skirt vulgarity'. Since this view could upset a few donors, it is swiftly retracted. 'There, I've just lost a few friends over that one'.

The second problem is that there is no particular rapport between Gayford and De Montebello. Gayford is a critic who gets on well with a wide range of contemporary artists and is their *confidante*. De Montebello does not have any particular interest in the practice of contemporary art and is steeped in the tradition of connoisseurship. Gayford is too deferential. In the museum profession there has long been speculation as to the nature of De Montebello's lineage, just how aristocratic he really is or is it just a pose ? All we are told is that his father was an art critic. Gayford does not probe De Montebello's opinions. For example, in the chapter on the Louvre, there is a discussion on how far the attribution of a picture affects the ways in which it is viewed. There is a difference in one's perception if a picture is given the name of an artist or is labelled French or Portuguese. But what exactly is the

nature of this difference ? How does the attribution of a name affect the ways in which a picture is judged and perceived ? We are not told.

So, what do we learn about Philippe de Montebello ? That he dislikes artificial lighting of paintings; disapproves (violently) of his colleagues who want to attract a larger audience to museums; smokes cigarillos; hates the Musée du Quai Branly; and admires the work of Rubens, Poussin and Velázquez. I'm not convinced that we needed a book to learn these facts.

Art Quarterly, Autumn 2014, page 34