I have had just over a year to learn about this very creative city, its history, its people, and its aspirations. Self-nominated as “The Live Music Capital of the World,” Austin has a proclaimed ambition, and apparently desires to be known not only for its special recreational qualities and “laid-back” style of life, but also for incubating and showcasing the cultural arts. Candidly, this is one of many reasons that motivated me to accept the position to become the director of the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas.

While cynics may well consider The Blanton’s current loan exhibition, *Turner to Monet: Masterpieces from the Walters Art Museum*, to be a “blockbuster” show, these forty paintings from one of America’s earliest public collections represent much more than a luminous display of beautiful works of art by famous artists. Our exhibition speaks to one of the key issues that Austin should well consider as it continues to evolve itself into an important point on the cultural map of this country.

The works of art on loan from The Walters—one of the country’s earliest and most prestigious collections—tell a story of two generations of one family, originating at a time prior to the Civil War. William, and later Henry Walters’, collection of art that was then “contemporary” in the United States and Europe achieved prominence because this father and son had the knowledge, passion, courage, and financial resources to purchase art that represented both the academic masters in France as well as the “new painting” that was still considered of questionable standards at the time of their acquisition. Their legacy is one that vividly reminds us that following what is already accepted and popular is not necessarily the pathway to enduring significance.

One of my very favorite quotations about the locus of value in visual art is from the twentieth-century Swiss artist, Paul Klee, a well-known teacher at the Bauhaus in Germany, a musician, and ultimately a highly regarded painter. In his Creative Credo (1920), Klee wrote: “Art does not reproduce the visible—rather it makes visible.” To expand upon Klee’s succinct point, the depths of human emotion, the heights of brilliant intellect, and mysteries of spiritual dynamic—in other words the aspects of beauty engendered by human creativity—are not always achieved through fastidious representations of the empirical world of appearances. Creative artists “make visible” by channeling what they see and sense into an original visual language, one that takes the standards of one’s time and builds upon and deepens those of the past generations. This was certainly true of Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Camille Pissasso and their cronies later to be known as “Impressionists” (initially a pejorative term used by a condemning critic) as well as any of the subsequent innovators of modern art that followed.

William and Henry Walters were reluctant but willing to challenge the accepted norms of beauty and art practice with their support of artists who were forging new ways of seeing. They patronized not only those who practiced the methods of the past, but also artists who recognized how the world was rapidly changing (e.g. the invention and advent of photography, as well as a general shifting from agrarian to industrial modes that impacted important social values ushered in by the twentieth century). Today, we are increasingly aware of how much more quickly our world is evolving. Many of us remember when the “next new thing” was the color television, push buttons on telephones, and the fax machine. Now, it is the newest version of the iPhone or the many other technological wonders that we could not have imagined only a few months ago.

Austin needs to understand that all generations of collectors and passionate art patrons can ill afford to lose touch with the most creative of today’s artists. One hundred years ago in Paris, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque were fully engaged with the representation of the world as a fractured, multi-dimensional, and concurrent phenomenon. Their new style of painting was called “Cubism” (also a negative term coined by a derisive critic), and it now seems to have uncannily predicted what the world of today feels like, in our multi-tasking, internet dizziness, when the human brain can no longer keep pace with the perpetually growing availability and increased access to information.

Having only lived here for sixteen months, I firmly believe that Austin has the capacity to be a truly great arts environment. In order to reach that destination, an embrace of creativity that is transcendent, innovative, and extraordinary (not merely “weird”) should be energetically embraced, valued, and recognized.