

2025 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Senior Essay - Marino Bertini Memorial Essay Award

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Beauty within the Rubble

Art is not just about what we see—it is about what it makes us feel, what it reveals, and

how it allows us to connect with our own emotions and experiences. Edgar Degas' quote, "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see," resonates deeply with me because of how both art and personal storytelling shape perception. Whether through paintings, architecture, or diaries, creative expression has the power to tell stories that linger, transform, and demand to be felt. My own encounters with art and personal history have profoundly shaped my understanding of memory, identity, and the human experience.

One of the most striking examples of this power is my visit to the Holocaust History Museum in Israel. The museum itself is an architectural story—designed as a triangular prism that narrows at the top, creating a sense of confinement. The cold, gray concrete and dim lighting reinforce the weight of history, while the deliberate incline of the floor mirrors the slow, uphill struggle of those who lived through the Holocaust. From the moment you step inside, you are forced to confront history without escape—cell service is blocked, and leaving early is not an option. It is a space that demands reflection, just as art does. At the end of the museum, a skylight floods the exit with light. It is a beacon of hope, but also a reminder—you cannot reach it without first walking through the darkness. The journey through the museum mirrors the way we experience difficult histories and personal grief. Just as a painting reveals meaning through its brushstrokes, the museum reveals its impact through structure and silence, making history not just something we learn but something we feel. I remember standing there, chills running through me, as I realized how much the space itself told a story—a story that words alone could never fully capture.

This idea of art as storytelling extends into my own life, particularly in my relationship with my grandpa's sister. She has Alzheimer's, and though her mind fades, her hands still write poetry in Russian cursive—letters that curve and twist like echoes of a past she struggles to hold onto. I watch her, feeling both connected and distant, as she pours fragments of herself onto paper. The ink swirls into something beautiful yet foreign to me, like memories slipping away before I can grasp them. Her writing is her art, her way of preserving a piece of herself, even as time threatens to erase it. Watching her has deepened my own connection to art, music, and writing as forms of self-expression. Music, especially, is where my heart finds comfort; the passion of Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and Queen has always spoken to me, and I let it carry my sadness, grief, and love. When words fail, music fills the space between emotions. My journal, too, holds pieces of me—late-night thoughts, half-formed ideas, feelings I struggle to articulate.

These creative outlets have become my way of making sense of loss, of time, of the inevitable changes that shape us. This experience has changed how I see my own creativity. The art I love, the words I write, the music I immerse myself in—they are not just pastimes; they are my response to the fragility of life. They are how I hold onto memories, how I create something lasting, how I tell my own story. Just as my grandpa's sister's poetry lingers on the page, I hope that my own creative expressions will endure in some way, capturing emotions and moments that might otherwise slip away.

I often find myself lost in art galleries, not just observing paintings but also watching the people who view them. Art, like life, has endless depth, it is never just about the image but about the emotions and stories hidden beneath the surface. Standing before a Pollock, I once exclaimed, "It's not just splattered paint!" because, in that moment, I saw something deeper—a reflection of chaos and control, of struggle and spontaneity, of life itself. The same can be said for any powerful artwork, personal diary, or lived experience. The true meaning lies not just in what is presented but in what it makes us feel, what it forces us to confront, and how it stays with us long after we have looked away. Art and personal storytelling are intertwined. They capture what words alone often cannot, preserving moments of pain, resilience, and beauty. Whether in a museum, a painting, a song, or the ink of a shaking hand, they remind us that even in loss, there is meaning. Even in darkness, there is light. Even in forgetting, there are stories that refuse to be erased.