The Lions Had Me at Hello:

The Baltimore Museum of Art

By Ingeborg Westfall

Call me old-fashioned, crazy, or just really strange, but massive concrete lions—their mouths wide in an imagined roar of greeting—flanking a building’s entrance always make me smile. Setting aside the convention of their use, to me they’re there to guard, to protect, to signify that what you’ll see as you pass them and enter their building is something extraordinary, something to bring wonderment, to treasure, to value. Let’s face it, giant sculptured hamsters or rabbits just wouldn’t convey quite the same feeling, although the rabbits on the decorated bus outside the American Visionary Art Museum are certainly perfect—but I digress. So it is that when I see those glorious Baltimore Museum of Art lions, whether in the springtime through cherry blossoms or in the dead of winter through bare branches, I know I’m in for a memorable visit.

I’ve written before about Baltimore’s place in my heart and memory, and how I feel that sometimes it may seem a Poor Relation of glamorous nearby D.C. Well, the BMA proves just how unfair and blighted that impression is. Make no mistake: This is a world-class museum, one of which all Marylanders can (and should) be mighty proud.

Founded in 1914 with one painting, today, the BMA owns more than 90,000 art objects, holds the world’s largest collection of the artworks of Henri Matisse, and welcomes more than 300,000 visitors yearly. Its large and varied collections include African, Asian, and European Art, Art of the Pacific Islands and the Ancient Americas, Antioch mosaics, contemporary American Art, African American Art, American Decorative Arts, and a wonderful collection of miniature rooms meticulously crafted by renowned Chicago miniaturist Eugene Kupjack at a scale of one inch equaling one foot. In the hallway where these rooms are exhibited in glass cabinets, there’s a stool that parents can move from place to place so their young children can see the rooms at eye level. That’s just one indication that BMA wants its exhibits to be truly accessible.

What exactly is the attraction of an art museum? Must one be a student of art, or perhaps an expert in art history, an artist, or a critic dictating what is worthy of enjoyment? I don’t pretend to be any of these individuals, to have any of these qualities, nor do I know more than the very basics of art (yes, the old “I know what I like”). The BMA knows that it will have visitors of widely different backgrounds, and it’s part of what makes the museum special that its written descriptions of the works, in plaques near the individual pieces, or their narrated descriptions on (free) audio self-guided tours, are informative and inclusive, not using off-putting terms or specialist language. True, no one is going to like or remember all the art he/she sees, but even I remember one or two: the massive, brooding *The Thinker* by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, a large religious-themed panel by Tiffany— a piece that takes my breath away time and again when the afternoon light shines on its stained glass.

Let’s see, what have I forgotten? Well, there’s the sculpture garden, lovely in any season, a gift shop with well-chosen items in a wide price range, and the in-house restaurant, Gertrude’s, specializing in Chesapeake Bay cooking, especially seafood. Of the latter, I overheard people say they were tempted to “lick their plates.”

And the good news? Admission is free to all. The museum’s website says some special exhibits may charge admission, but during my two recent visits, there was no charge for any of several wonderful ones. Go—and say hi to the lions for me: www.artbma.org; 443-573-1700.