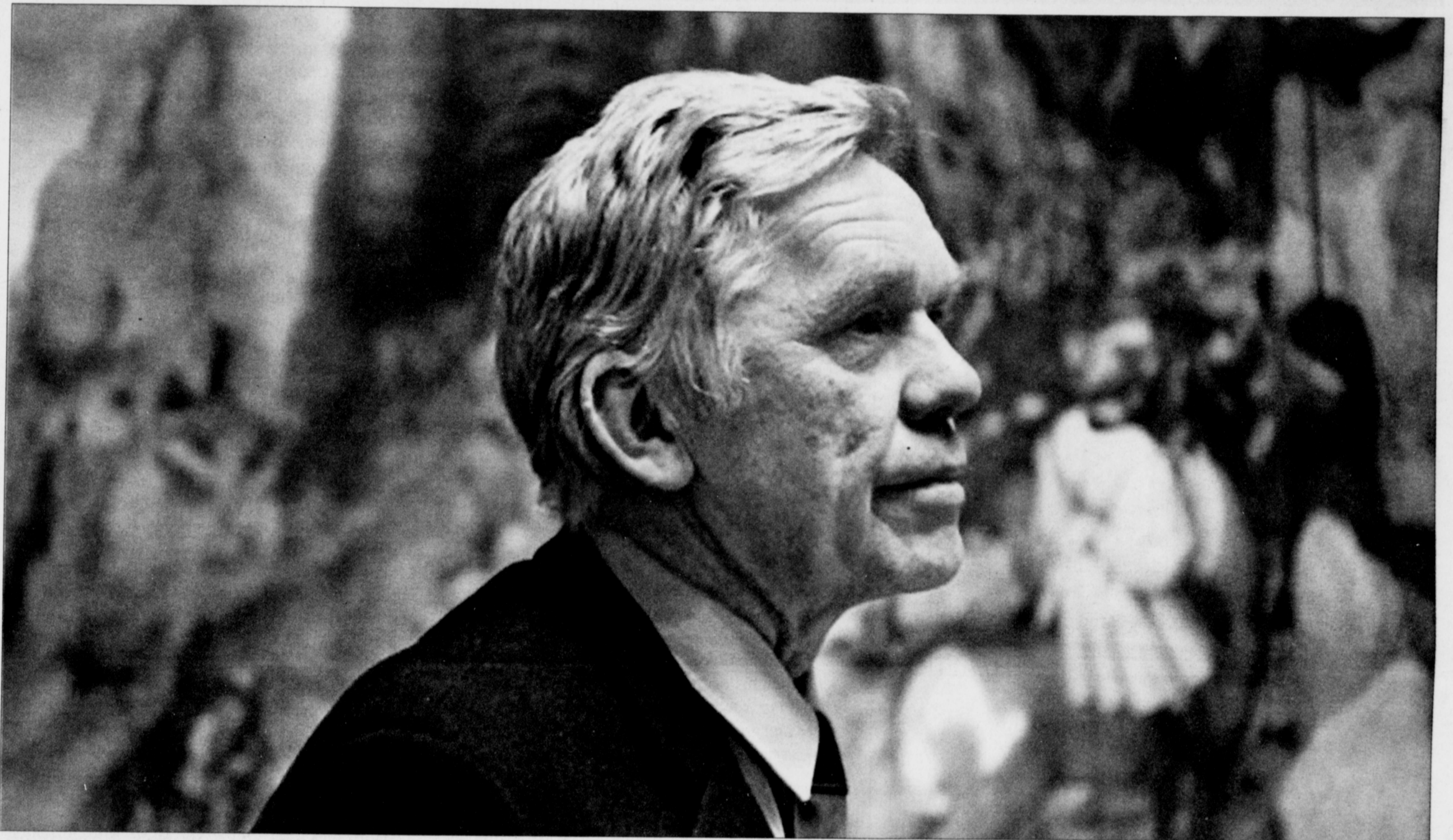


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Bobby Sommer in 'Museum Hours.'

PHOTO BY CINEMA GUILD

Museum Hours

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DARLEEN ORTEGA



Poetic film offers a lesson in mindfulness

I despair of conveying just how rich and profound an experience watching "Museum Hours" can be.

The film will sound slow -- and it is -- and tedious -- which it most certainly isn't. It doesn't have much in the way of a plot, and portions of the film are spent listening in on conversations between a man and a woman in late middle age, or wandering in the dead of winter through Vienna streets that are off the beaten tourist track. The rest is spent inside an art museum, lingering over the

works of Rembrandt and Bruegel and various works of antiquity.

But if you are open to it, this film -- like a Bruegel painting -- may quietly unsettle you, and move you, and open you up.

Early on we are introduced to two characters. Johann works in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna as a security guard. He muses about what it is like to spend hours in the quiet of the museum, observing the patrons and surrounded by masterworks that nearly always reward each visit with some new treasure. He is a gentle, watchful soul.

A woman catches his eye. She returns to the museum several times, appearing a bit lost. It occurs to Johann to wonder

"[w]hat [it is] about some people that makes you curious, while with others one would be just as happy not to know anything about them." He strikes up a conversation with the woman, Anne, and learns that she is visiting from Montreal in order to see a cousin who is in a coma. Johann kindly but warily assists Anne with directions to the hospital and offers help in communicating with the doctors.

The two strike up a friendship. It will not be a romance (Johann is gay), but they share a love for heavy metal music and an enthusiasm for acute observation. He visits the hospital with her. They wander the museum, and the streets of Vienna. He opens the city to

her, thereby reminding himself of corners he has forgotten to savor.

Eventually the film settles into a kind of reverie. It moves back and forth between the streets and the paintings. It is as if the walls between the worlds inside and outside become porous, and we begin to move freely between the two. The camera lingers over a stark landscape, or skin illuminated by light, and then moves to a street or a weathered face outside, as if to suggest that one of the masters well might choose this for his subject. In one scene, the camera moves back and forth between painted nudes and a few ordinary-looking patrons -- and suddenly the patrons are nude too, and simi-

larly unashamed.

It occurred to me to wonder where this was all going. I love art, and museums, and enjoy watching people, but am unused to such stillness in films. Even as I was frequently moved by the careful framing of each shot and by the director's attentiveness to the humanity of his subjects, I wondered where he was taking me.

An extended sequence in the Bruegel room helped me to sink deeper into the film's reverie. A docent guides a group of patrons to notice Bruegel's canvasses filled with humble, working people engaged in ordinary or odd activities.

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