

Art in the Capitol

Originally when my high school art teacher, Ms. Suveges, told me about the nationwide Congressional Art Competition, I didn't think I'd ever win, but I entered anyway because I love art and I try to enter as many shows as I can. I had a piece that was perfect for the competition, a lighthouse in oils, dark blues and whites against a stormy sea backdrop. Our paintings were supposed to somehow reflect the state we live in, and I've seen a lot of lighthouses around Oregon, including Heceta, the one I live near, in Florence.



After we sent the painting to be judged in Salem along with the other Oregon contestants. It was a few weeks wait, in which time I forgot about it, because again, I never thought I had a chance. When the results came in and I heard that I had won for our entire congressional district in Oregon, it was beyond crazy. It's by far the biggest accomplishment of my life, especially as an artist, and I still can't believe that *my* painting is hanging in the Capitol.

We packed for the trip in June, booked the tickets all while my art teacher reached out to the Florence community to help my parents pay for the trip. Kiwanis, FRAA and Delta Gamma came through making it possible to go! I've never been out to the east coast before, so not only was it my first time to Washington DC, but my first time on that side of the country.

The trip to DC was a long one, and our first flight got delayed in Denver, our second flight got canceled and then rerouted where we ended up in BWI airport in Baltimore, with no way to get to our room in DC, we were forced to spend most of the night in the airport. By the time my uncle rescued us in Baltimore in the morning to drive us into DC, we had been up more than 24 hours and were exhausted.

Even getting to our room turned out to be difficult, because huge parts of the city were being completely blockaded due to a massive Pride parade. As it turned out, our room was an oasis, we spent most of our first day in DC sleeping.

Eventually, we woke up in the early evening, and ventured out. Because we didn't have a car, we walked all over the city, which I'm actually grateful for, because we got to see so much more in a lot closer detail.



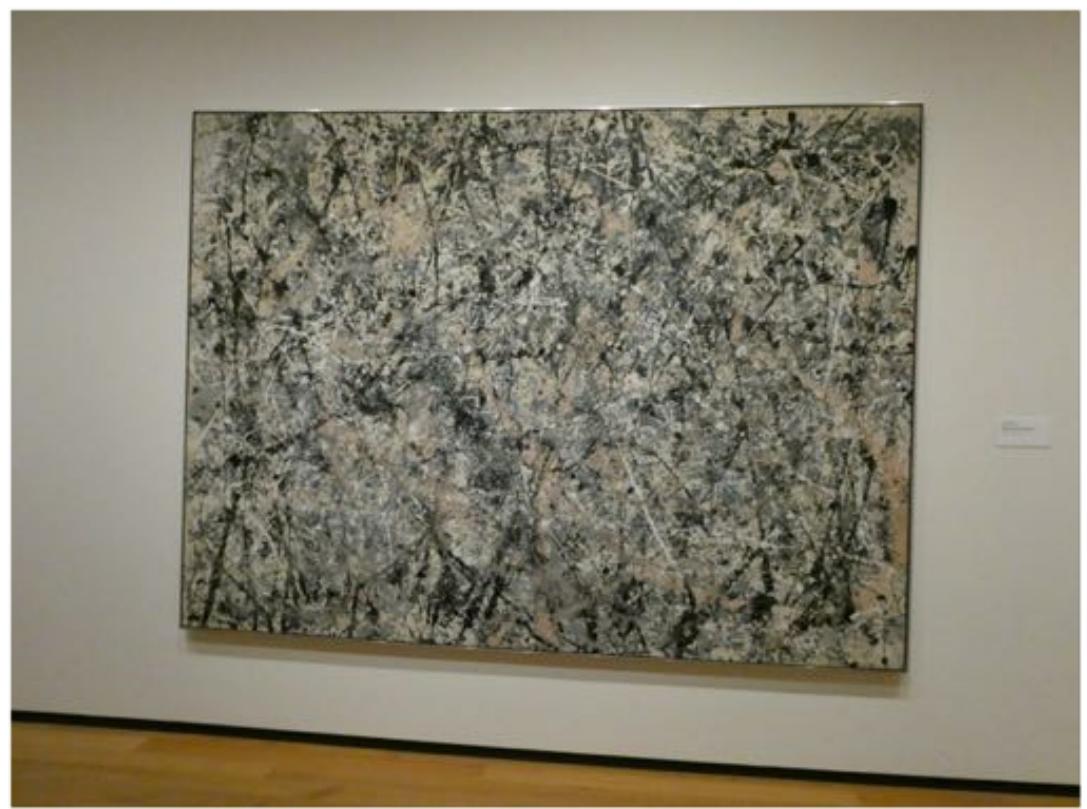
The first museum we went to was the National Gallery of Art, and as an artist it was one of my favorites. We went through almost every room, and got to see Van Goghs, Monets, Rembrandts, and Picassos, and countless others dating from hundreds of years ago to present day.

One thing that jumped out was how each room was painted a different color, not too bright, just muted dark greens, grays, reds, golds, and blues. It made the artwork stand out more and added to the experience of it being strangely modern with such ancient art.



Another cool thing was how they encouraged photography, meaning, I got to take photos of the art. A lot of museums I've been in don't allow it, which was good, because I took a ton of pictures. I wanted to remember all the amazing art. It was inspiring and overwhelming to see the history of art all in one place. Literally, an art history course in a very loose way.

The East Wing was especially interesting with its modern art, and some really wild impressionistic pieces, including Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Jackson Pollock. They even have some of Piet Mondrian's works, who I believe is one of the most overrated artists, due to his square abstract style, which to me looks no better than the color coded floor plan of a building.

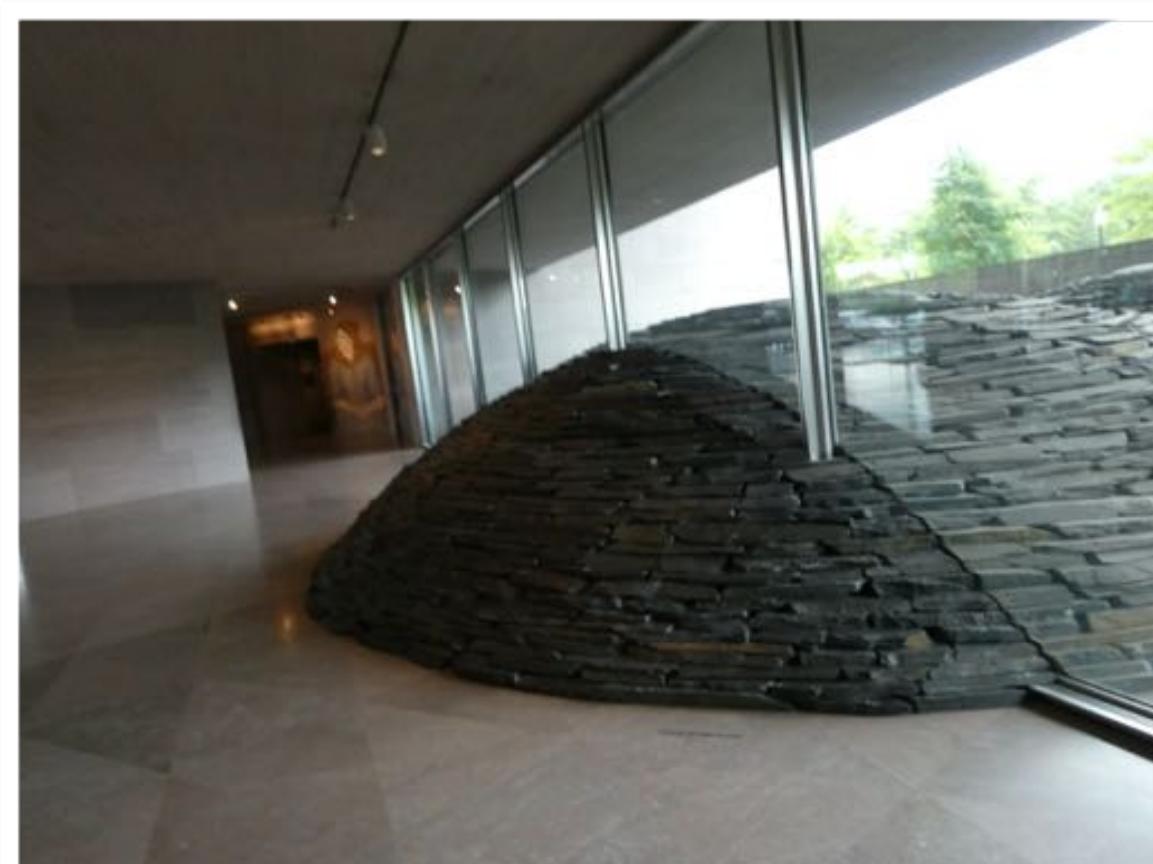


Seeing Van Gogh and Matisse was incredible though, some of the most famous and beautiful works of art in the world.

Some of the most moving and fascinating artwork I encountered was located in the African American art exhibit in the lower level of the National Gallery East Wing, it depicted scenes of the Civil war, slavery and prison, which was really meaningful. That is what art does to me, it makes me feel whatever was going on in the painter's mind, in the subject's situation. Powerful stuff.

The building was wild, as if a work of art itself, it had crazy architecture domes of dark rocks melting through the windows, and high open spaces with metal artwork hanging on chains from the ceiling. The art, the history, the architecture, creating an all

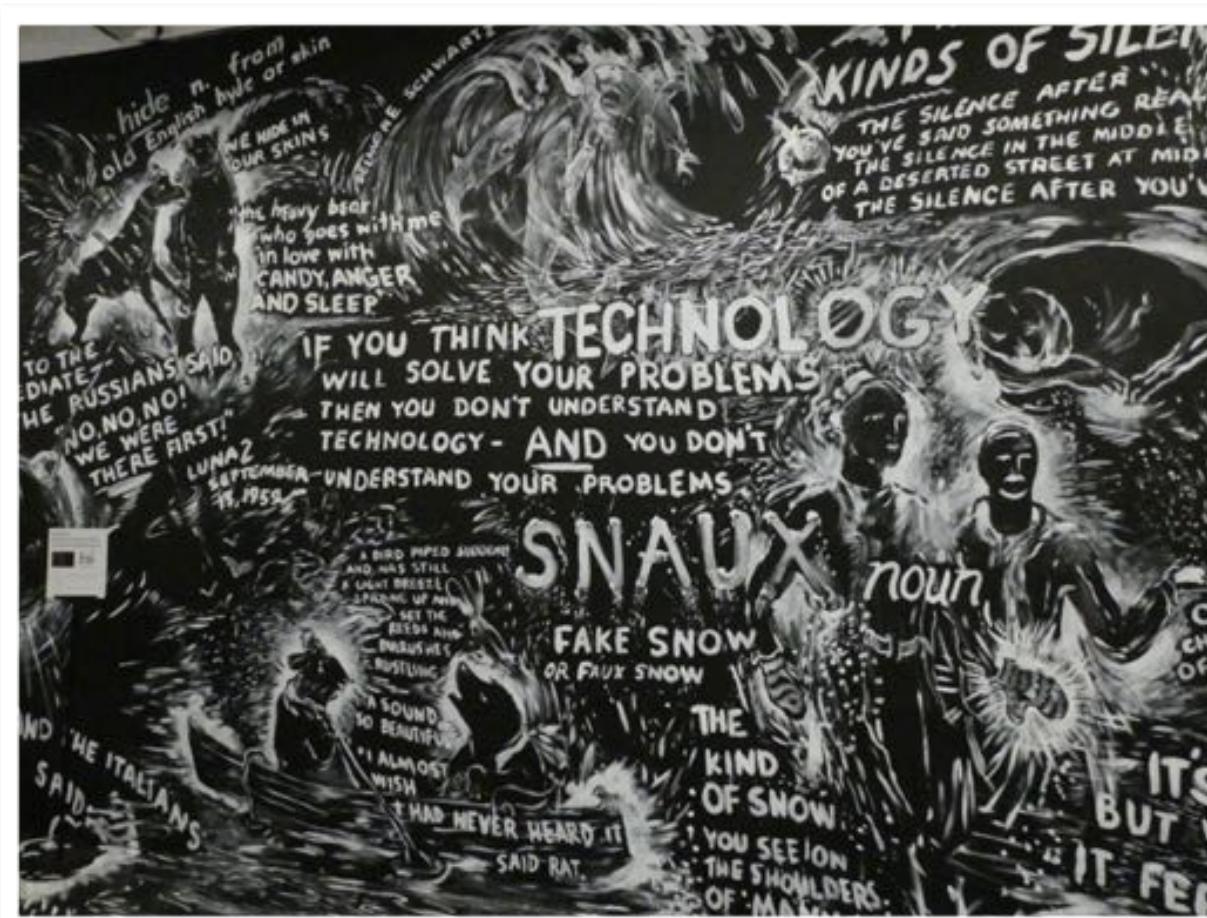
sensorial contact with, not just another culture, but another thought, expression, so creative and so different.



Seeing all the artwork in the National Gallery really put into perspective how unique an artist is, how rare it is to meet people actively pursuing it. The city has so much history, it's an incredible experience being immersed in it, and seeing all the art was amazing.

The Hirshhorn, by far my favorite museum, is named for Joseph Hirshhorn, one of the original collection givers. It had really different art within its massive circular walls, including, the most dramatic on the whole trip, an entire room painted black with white sketchy style artwork and lettering on the floors and walls. Things that the artist said, here are some of her quotes:

"The purpose of art is to provide what life cannot. Do you actually believe this? As if it had a purpose!", and other phrases such as "Beauty in all its forms. Funny how hatred can also be a beautiful thing... when it's as sharp as a knife" and "You are not the center of the universe" Opening the door to that painted room, "Four Talks," by Laurie Anderson, and you walked right *into* a painting, into the artist's mind.



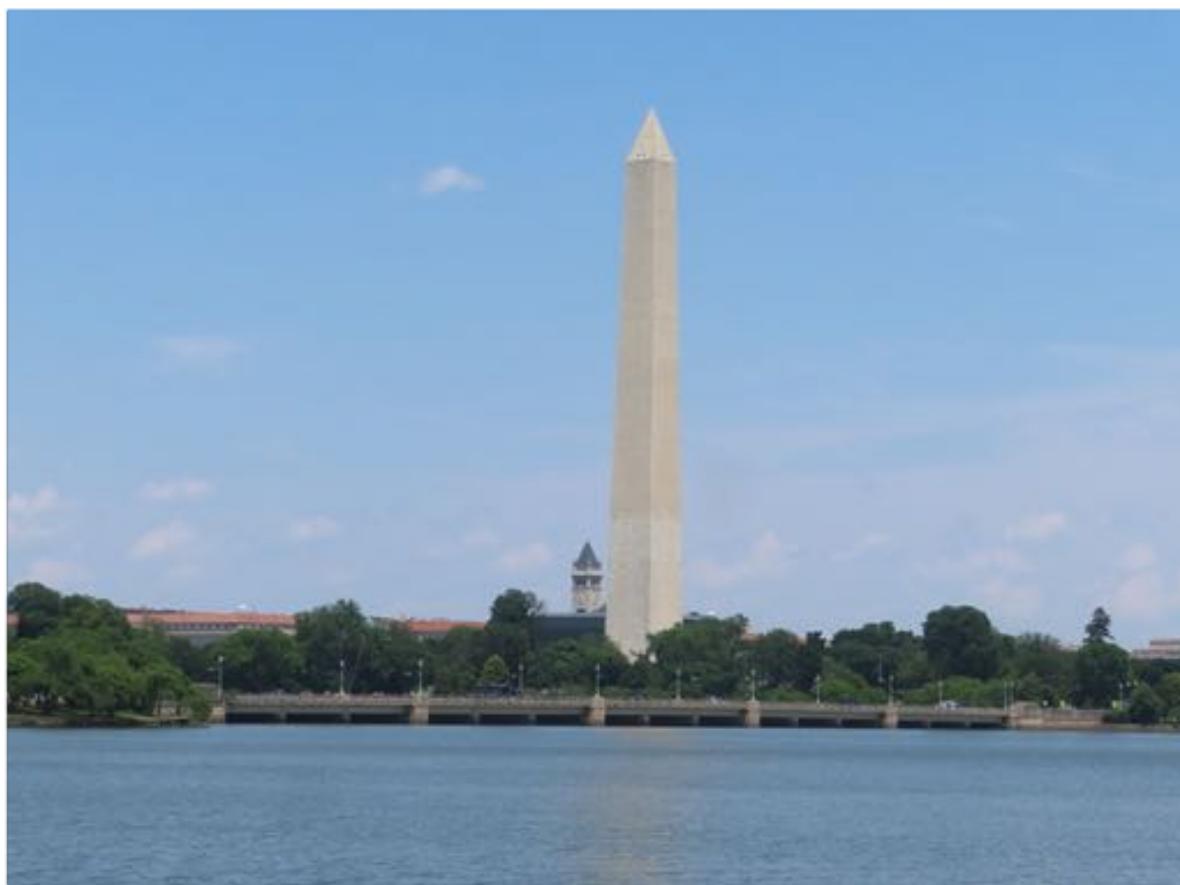
The Hirshhorn also had a statue garden with angular, bronze, stone, wood sculptures of just design, modern, edgy, round, other-worldly. There was Rodin's actual Burgers of Calais, I heard his name first from my grandma, who herself is a marble sculptor. This garden has dozens of sculptures all over, including a reflecting pool where we sat and ate our bag lunch literally surrounded by art.



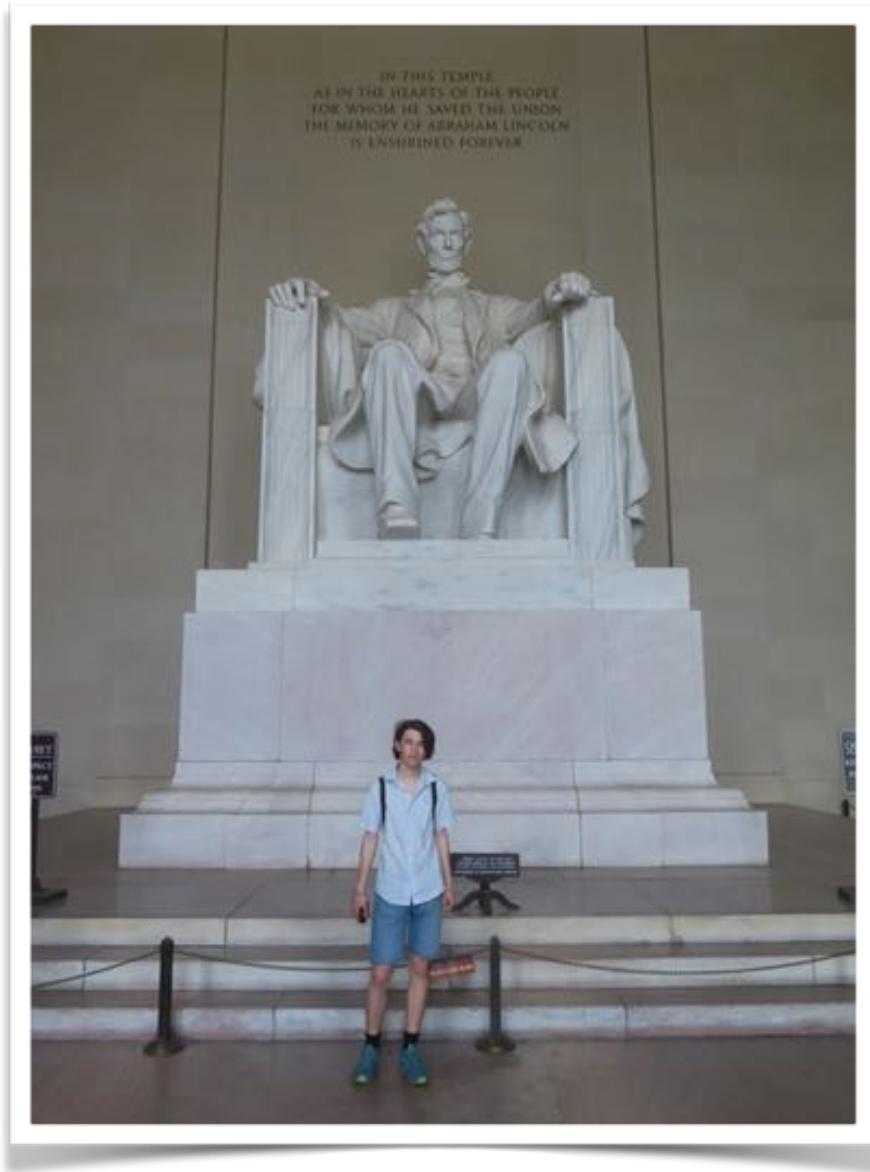
Next we visited the Smithsonian Museum of American History. The sixty one year old building's dark interior, lit halls and displays, some garish, all informative, was pure fun, and easy to get lost in. I love politics and history, they're two of my favorite subjects, so exploring the huge arena of levels of historic documented events in practically living theatre-like feel, especially the room that was filled with every American presidential paraphernalia possible. It was exciting to see so many pieces of famous American history, like Lincoln's actual top hat, and the original Star-Spangled Banner, which is kept in a dark room to protect it from fading.



One of the days, we rented street bikes, took my parents a few tries to figure it out, but once we did, we pedaled to the monuments, including Washington, which is one I really want to paint, because of how imposing it is, being the tallest structure in DC. One thing I learned that I didn't know, is that it took over a century for the Washington Monument to be built. Construction began in 1848, but political disagreements and the Civil War made it stop when the structure was only about one-third complete. Work resumed in 1879, and builders used different marble, which is why the monument has a slightly different color-change partway up. Finally completed in 1884 and opened in 1888, the 555-foot marble obelisk became the tallest structure in the world at the time.



Even though the Lincoln memorial was insanely crowded, it was haunting, seeing the legacy of the great former president carved in stone, one of the most amazing things I've experienced. Built in 1914, it features 36 marble columns representing the states in the Union at the time of Lincoln's death, and two of his most famous speeches, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address, inscribed on the inner walls. To be at the spot of Martin Luther King's famous I Have a Dream speech was quite an experience.



From there we continued cycling around a paved path, and after passing through two towering monoliths, we emerged into a beautiful peaceful plaza—the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. A massive thirty foot tall statue cut from granite captures the magnitude of MLK. Standing there you could almost hear the great man's famous words echoing over the water.



Leaving there we pedaled along a narrow path bordering the tidal basin until we arrived at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. I stood in front of the forever waterfall, and saw the statue of Roosevelt in his wheelchair, incredible that one of America's most powerful presidents was confined to a wheelchair. Inspiring.

Eventually we cycled around to the other side of the tidal basin, the body of water was created in 1870.

The Tidal Basin was made by the Army Corps of Engineers as part of a major flood control project to help keep the Potomac River from flooding. At the time, the river repeatedly overflowed and the nearby shoreline was muddy and unusable. Engineers dredged the river and used the material to build new parkland, forming the man-made basin as a controlled body of water that could help manage tides and flooding. It later became a scenic centerpiece of West Potomac Park, now famous for its cherry blossoms and the memorials that reflect in it.



We reached one of the most beautiful monuments, the Jefferson Memorial. Because he was the author of the Declaration of Independence and one of the Founding Fathers, perhaps our smartest president, I was excited to see it. The circular structure opened on April 13, 1943, Jefferson's 200th birthday and was dedicated by President Roosevelt. From there we had a distant view of the White House.

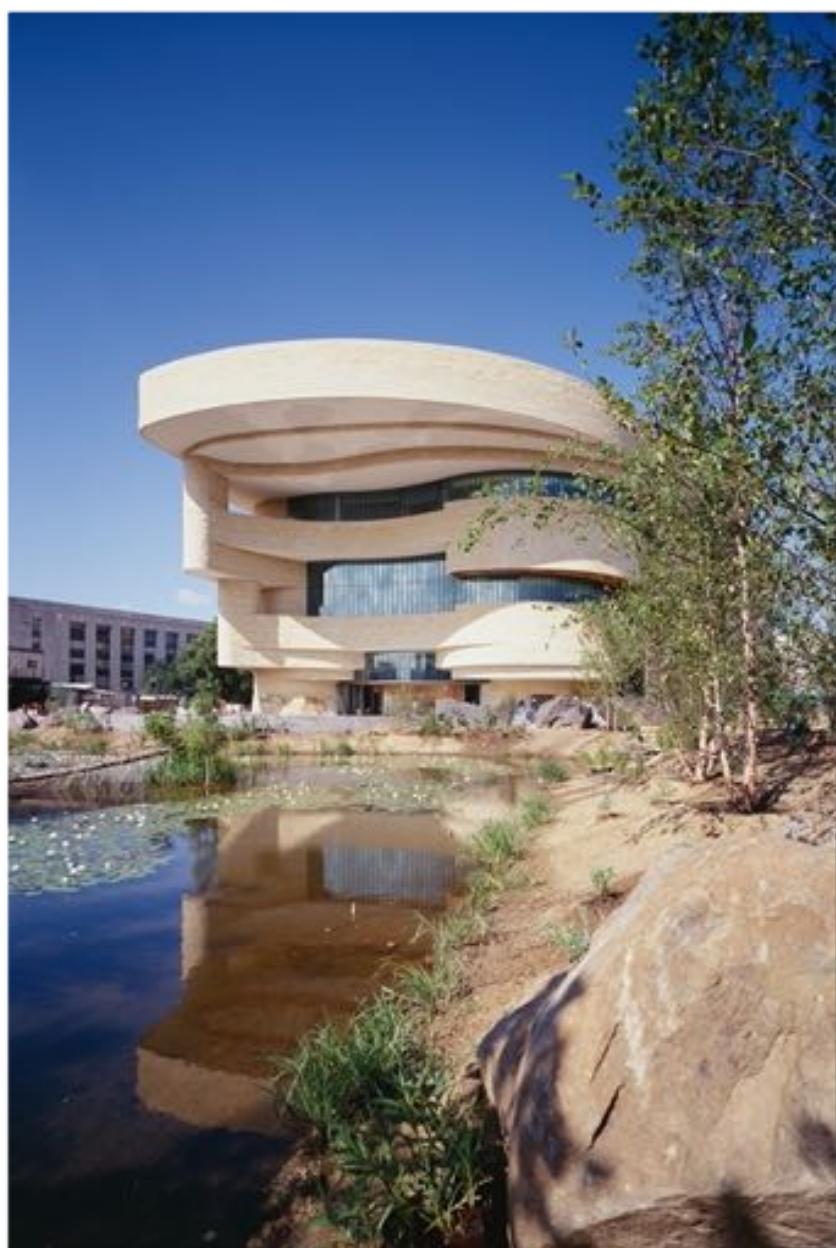


Later, we also rode by the back of the White House, one of the most famous structures in the world, and I was only 100 yards from the front door of the place! So powerful, so small looking, so historic, so different to be there in person, instead of seeing it on tv. I was surprised to learn every American president other than George Washington has lived there and that it was almost completely destroyed by fire in 1814. It was fun to imagine what might be going on inside as I stared at the Executive Mansion.



On one of the final days we visited the Smithsonian Native American museum. One of the newer museums on the National Mall, it opened September 21, 2004. Since I was born in Taos, New Mexico, I was especially interested to experience the Native art and history there.

It had some unique and inspiring art, painted on clothes and animal skins. There was a room that had every piece of merchandise named after Native Americans in it. A lot of incredible artwork and graphic design work. The building itself looked like it had been carved out of smooth tan rock, certainly one of the most impressive buildings I saw.



Because history is one of my favorite subjects, the World War II exhibit was particularly fascinating, especially seeing the political cartoons that had been drawn at the time. I think politics are taken far too seriously in the modern era, and political cartoons have always been some of my favorite artwork for that reason.

We also went to the National Portrait Gallery, which was another beautiful and historic building. Originally it was used to house the U.S. Patent Office in 1836. Eventually it became a museum to showcase artwork, primarily portraits. It held some of the largest paintings I've ever seen, ones that occupied full walls. It had what seemed like hundreds of metal arms painted gold, suspended on gold-like structured rope in the main atrium, I still don't understand what that installation was about.



One of its more interesting rooms had massive panels, taller than me and at least 30 feet wide, covered in chopped up rubber wheels, car tires, bicycle wheels, and all manner of rubber items, attached to the canvas, curling out like black snakes. There were also rooms of famous portraits, many of which were comical, which were some of my favorites, I've always enjoyed cartoons and caricatures. There was even a massive blue rooster statue on one of the roof's alcoves, which was a bit out of place.





I even saw some Georges Seurat which is one of my favorite artists! He's best known for his pointillism artworks, in which an image is composed of millions of dots. Standing back, you can see the picture, but close up all you see is dots. Despite having so many amazing pieces of artwork, there were also a few questionable ones. Maybe I'm just too young to understand the genius in them, but I don't know...



We also went to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum which was one of the most awe inspiring ones we visited. Sadly multiple rooms of it were closed for renovations, but the main atrium was open, and being inside the cockpit of a Boeing 747 was insane. It was a lot smaller than I thought it would be.

The landing probe that went to the moon was suspended in a dark and colorful and lit up space with stars and a lot of the space suits and relics from the first launch, which was wild to see. I can't believe something so small could survive traveling through the atmosphere. We even got to see the Spirit of St. Louis, which was the first solo non-stop transatlantic flight, back on May 20th 1927

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Washington DC is also a very beautiful city. Filled with statues, historic architecture, old churches, row houses, marble government buildings and the Capitol itself, with all the bronze statues and details inside the dome and chambers. Every block seems to be a new history lesson.



Eventually, the day came for the artist reception for the Congressional Art Competition. We were dressed up so decided to take a bus, but once aboard discovered that they no longer accept cash. We had to download an app to pay, but my dad's phone was too old and my mother's ended up getting some sort of ad-ware instead of the app. We were worried they would make us get off. Thankfully, the bus driver was one of the nicest people we met in the city, and he gave us passes for multiple free rides.

When we arrived at the Capitol, a staff member from Representative Val Hoyle's office met us and gave my parents and me a long private tour of the Capitol building. Just before we met the Congresswoman in her Congressional office. Outside her door there is the Oregon state flag, along with the flags for the four Native American tribes of her congressional district of Oregon.



The U.S. Capitol is crowned by the 19 foot bronze Statue of Freedom, standing atop its massive metal dome, which weighs over eight million pounds. The Capitol was built in 1793, horribly using slaves as part of the workforce. The dome was then expanded during the 1850s and was continually worked on throughout the Civil War because Abraham Lincoln really wanted it to be finished to symbolize how strong the Union was.

Washington, D.C. was chosen as the capital through the Residence Act of 1790 as a neutral site between North and South. Now, the Capitol houses all 100 senators and 435 representatives, supported by thousands of staff members who keep the legislative branch running.



Me with Val Hoyle, our congresswoman:



One of my favorite parts of the trip was that guided tour of the Capitol building, including the Rotunda at the top, a massive round domed room with huge murals along the walls.

The Capitol has a statue collection, which is called the National Statuary Hall, and was created by an act of Congress in 1864. Each U.S. state is invited to honor two deceased citizens who are “Illustrious for their historic renown or for distinguished civic or military services.” Every state as such gets two statues, to honor notable people. Some of the statues are really cool and very detailed.



We also got to see the original Senate chambers, which was really cool, the room was hauntingly silent, cushioned from sound by the chairs and heavy carpets. It was a pretty amazing feeling walking the same corridors as senators and congressmen. So many ghosts of history in that building.



The Supreme Court used to meet at the Capitol, and they showed us the preserved room, a place where on March 6, 1857, the disastrous Dred Scott decision was made. The Dred Scott decision was significant because the Supreme Court ruled that black people weren't citizens, had no rights, and that Congress couldn't ban slavery in territories, effectively invalidating the Missouri Compromise and escalating North-South tensions, fueling the path to the Civil War.

Seeing the spaces where massive decisions were made hundreds of years ago, and still are. I don't know if the Capitol is always crowded, but with over 400 students like myself and their families, it was like an ant hill.

When we entered the long tunnel where all the artwork from the competition is currently displayed, a space traveled by over three million people each year, including senators, members of congress and even the president, I was really humbled and proud. Seeing hundreds of paintings and drawings done by people my age was amazing, and made me feel a lot less alone.



During the presentation, the Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries both recorded speeches to the winners that were played on a giant screen during the ceremony, which was really cool, to be spoken to about art and our futures by two successful politicians. Also, the keynote speaker, H. Alexander Rich, was very inspiring. His opening line was “Put this on your résumé.”



I even went to an art supply store in DC and bought a pen, because why not!

There were so many moments that left impressions on me. The Vietnam veterans memorial, one I specifically wanted to experience, because I've seen so many pictures of the black granite walls and lists of names. Seeing it reminded me how useless war is. Killing each other is such a useless way of solving problems. Thousands of people died and most were not much older than me.



The Korean War memorial imposed a similar message, but instead of names, it had the faces of soldiers carved lightly into black granite, chipped out of the semi-reflective surface, as well as life sized bronze statues of a platoon of American soldiers. As if they were still there among the viewers.



We also got to visit one of the largest open air farmers markets in America, which was really cool, like 20 times the size of the one here in Florence. It took like 30 minutes of walking just to see it all. And with a reward of a blueberry muffin, worth the hot morning walk!

On one of our many strolls around DC, we passed several of the world's embassies, many housed in unique large mansions and other antique buildings tucked away on the quieter streets.

One of the cooler things about being in DC, is although it's a city, with millions of people and huge buildings and museums, because of the building height rule—that no building can be taller than the Washington monument—it doesn't feel as claustrophobic and overbuilt like many cities do.



Overall, this trip to Washington, DC was more than just winning the Congressional Art Competition, it was an experience that I'll never forget, and it really put into perspective art and history. Standing in front of masterpieces that I've studied only in books, exploring museums that felt like living in history and art itself, and walking the same streets and hallways as some of America's most famous people. Inspiring, overwhelming, and unforgettable, and it made me even more certain that art is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

The interior of the Capitol's rotunda:

