

The Wall Street Journal

In the Middle of the Action

'Immersive' art is more popular than ever, but is it just a passing trend?

Not counting "Hamilton," Broadway's hottest musical is "Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812," an "immersive" show for which the Imperial Theatre has been remodeled in order to put the cast in the laps of the audience. Runways in the orchestra, onstage cabaret seating inches away from the performers, stairways leading directly from the stage to the balcony: Everybody's everywhere.

"The Great Comet" is a prime example of "immersive theater," which blurs the borderline separating artists from spectators. It's the No. 1 buzzword in theater—but it's not an exclusively theatrical phenomenon. Broadly similar ideas are popping up throughout the wider world of art, so much so that merely to play a symphony, hang a painting or dance a ballet is becoming almost passé. "Sleep No More," an interactive adaptation of "Macbeth" in which the audience walks through the rooms of the "hotel" in which the show takes place, opened off Broadway in 2011 and is still running. Major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, are booking "Disney 'Fantasia' Live in Concert," in which the animated film is shown on a giant movie screen while Beethoven, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky are played live. I recently read about a site-specific underwater sculpture off the coast of California that can only be viewed by scuba divers. That's immersive art!

The target audience for most of these presentations is the under-40 generation, fewer of whose multitasking members go to concerts, plays or museums with any regularity. The idea of buying a ticket to "La Bohème" or "Romeo and Juliet," then showing up next Tuesday at eight o'clock sharp and sitting down to watch the performance, is increasingly alien to them. "Art" is something they download and

experience at a time and place of their choosing, more often than not alone rather than in the company of others.

How to get such folk off their couches? One approach is to present art in a way that, like "Disney 'Fantasia' Live in Concert," appeals to more than one of the senses. Another is to offer them a participatory experience—a "show" that's active rather than passive. Such is the new conventional wisdom, and there's something to it: I was struck by the number of young faces I saw in the audience for the performance of "The Great Comet" that I attended a couple of weeks ago. And you don't have to charge down the aisles to get them involved: The same desire to participate more fully in the experience of art is what drives museumgoers to look at paintings while consulting downloadable apps that explain what they're seeing. It also explains the popularity of post-show "talkbacks" in which artists take questions from the audience—as well as the proclivity of millennials to text and tweet about performances, not just after a show but during it.

I have mixed feelings about the participatory-art trend, not because I'm rigidly opposed to it but because it too often seems to exist in tension with the old-fashioned way of experiencing art, which is by paying full attention to it. How well can you see Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)" when you're simultaneously reading about it on your smartphone or hearing it described by a voice in your ear? How well can you hear Paul Dukas's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" when you're simultaneously watching Mickey Mouse cavort on a giant screen? I'm especially concerned about the effects of tweeting on the ability to appreciate art, which I suspect are similar to the effects of texting on the ability to drive down a highway at 70 miles an hour without crashing.

But I'm also impressed by the power of immersive and participatory presentations to involve young audiences, and I suspect they're more than just a fad. My hope, though, is that those who see them will then try experiencing art the old-fashioned way, tuning out the rest of the world and "immersing" themselves completely in the work itself. For

me, there's nothing more "immersive" than witnessing a live performance in the midst of a group of like-minded, totally attentive strangers—especially one that takes place in a small space. I can't imagine an artistic experience more "immersive" than seeing Luciana Souza, the Brazilian jazz singer, perform at New York's Jazz Standard, a nightclub that holds just 100 people, as she did last month. No multimedia gimmicks—just a superlative artist singing beautiful songs in a room so tiny that you could hear her breathe. If that doesn't beat binge-watching the third season of "Game of Thrones" on your iPad, I don't know what does.

—Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, writes "Sightings," a column about the arts, every other Thursday. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.