As far as the eye can see

At an art exhibition put up by Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Sarawak students recently, I noticed a phenomenon that's becoming an increasingly common sight these days.

Here and there, groups of secondary school students were taking photographs of themselves with the displayed artworks. Sculptures and installation pieces seemed to be the most popular photography accessories, with the students taking turns to pose next to them while their friends clicked away on cameras and mobile phones.

It wasn't just the students who were enjoying themselves taking photographs. Other visitors were also snapping away, either taking photos of the artworks or of themselves posing with the pieces. And I wouldn't be surprised if the photographs were instantly uploaded on Facebook or Twitter to be shared with friends.

Now, I'm not against this practice by any means.

I can understand the impulse to photograph artworks at an exhibition, especially pieces that appeal to us or that we find interesting.

With digital cameras and camera-enabled mobile phones readily available, it is so easy nowadays for people to record what they see and do everyday.

And social networking sites make it simple to share these images with others at the click of the mouse (or a tap on the screen, if you use a smartphone).

The urge to take photographs or video recordings isn't limited to art exhibitions. It extends to practically every sphere of life, especially where live performances are involved. At concerts, parties, gigs and sports events, there are bound
to be happy-snappy people with cameras and phones in their hands.

To a certain extent I've done this myself. I've taken video recordings and photographs of some concerts and rehearsals I've attended, as well as at museums and art galleries (where it isn't prohibited to take photographs).

I suppose we're motivated by the desire to capture the moment for posterity, to be able to watch again a concert performance, relive happy hours spent with friends and families or see again objects of beauty rather than try to remember what they looked like. To be able to say "I was there - and I've got the photos to prove it."

I know that when I took a video of the SMK St Joseph school band rehearsing their concert piece recently, it was because I wanted to be able to see it again and also to have a record of it.

However, I can't help wondering whether this desire to whip out our cameras at every opportunity actually detracts from our experience and appreciation of the moment itself.

We'd be so occupied with looking through the viewfinder or at the screen that we wouldn't be giving the performance or party or exhibit our full and undivided attention, or just to enjoy it without getting distracted by the need to take yet another photograph or video.

For example, I wonder whether those shutter-happy visitors at the UTM exhibition actually took time to contemplate and appreciate each piece of art, or whether they viewed the artworks merely as objects to be photographed.

I noticed a similar thing at the Bario Commandos Heritage exhibition at the Art Museum, where some visitors seemed to be just taking pictures of the exhibits without really reading and understanding the stories they told.

Here's another example. My sister once had the privilege of watching Arsenal play at the Emirates Stadium in London. Naturally she took some videos of the match and showed them to me later. In one video, after a few minutes all I could see was a patch of grass.

"Where's the ball?" I asked.
"I think I was looking at the pitch at that time," she responded.

This illustrates my point - when you're actually there at the stadium, watching a match unfold before your eyes in all its excitement, why would you want to view it through a tiny camera screen when you can see the whole thing, gloriously live, right in front of you?

On the one hand, I realise that we want to have a record of our experiences so that we can say we were there and share the moment with others.

On the other hand, wouldn't we savour the experience more if we put away our cameras and just concentrate on enjoying it?

Perhaps we should be more judicious in using our cameras and really enjoy our special moments without distraction.