

Art: The Historical Question

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The ancient Greeks, faced with the project of understanding the human experience, brought forth the tragedies of Aeschylus and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer.

Dante, trying to come to grips with the dark undercurrents of this world, conjured the spirit of Virgil as a guide right through the center of hell (a place packed with celebrities of Dante's day).

Shakespeare took his audiences through similar reaches peopling the public imagination with kings and queens whose doom, because they ruled the world around them, had to matter.

In all these tales, great artists found ways to confer upon even the darkest, most chaotic side of human experience some profound sense of ritual, order and meaning. Today, in an age basted with pop culture and political farce, it has become easy to lose touch with the sense that there are larger schemes to life, or time-honored ways of finding soul-deep relief from private sorrows.

Shakespeare and the Greeks still flicker through our schools, but in the main, this level of art turns up mainly through miniseries or movies that try to approximate the large themes, but don't come close.

What, then, are we missing in art in this last year of the twentieth century? I have to admit up front that I envy a bygone world, one in which art adhered to the values I believe in—beauty, decorum, elegance, classicism. How to describe what has happened to art in the modern and post-modern worlds?

Total abstraction, the dissolving of the various media of art—painting, sculpture, architecture—into mutations. Spiritual values, superb craftsmanship: they are gone with the wind. What accounts for our civilization's loss? The loss of God, it would seem.

Conservatives, rightly, blame television as the chief corrupting influence, followed by movies, the decline of the written word, and the utter revamping of our educational system. But I think these are symptoms of the larger loss. When the elites of Western culture chose enlightenment over revelation beginning in the seventeenth century, what they were choosing—Voltaire, Bayle, and others—was a steady, slow divorce of culture from Christianity. The result was a marginalization of culture previously informed, animated, and illuminated by a Christian aesthetic, sometimes overtly and sometimes not so clearly.

The loss of God in art has given us a kind of culture-wide isolation of the soul,

not without suffering, whether it is in the form of fragmented, austere art or in meaningless information and data smog. Whether it is the central theme of the canvas, or the way business is conducted in the everyday world, all seems to be devoid of a larger purpose or context. We are plagued by deconstructionists who harp on the problematic relationship of language to reality. We are missing philosophers who believe that language is capable of mapping reality. The post-modern world treats children as tiny consumers, bombarding them with advertisements and sexually explicit images. No more treating childhood as a distinct stage of life to be protected from the information of adults.

And all this gets reflected, sooner or later, on the canvas, and in the music, and in the paintings, and in the sculpture. I am a Protestant, but Father Benedict Groeschel got it exactly right when he recently wrote that we are the loneliest people in the loneliest country in the loneliest age in human history. Our art, and the stuff of everyday life, reflects that. A divorce between culture and faith seeps down to every level.

Civilization is, in the words of Proust, “a vase full of scents and sounds and projects and climates.” Does ours seem spent?

We are badly in need of a rapprochement between culture and faith; only that reconnection will bring to the fore the high talent and tranquil monumentality that are the foundations of the best art, the finest of the fine arts. Art’s natural enemy—like man’s—is chaos.

I don’t think it is too much to say that art is our most advanced attempt to map out our chaos so we can avoid disappearing into it. But it is a sore substitute for faith, for genuine spirituality. John Ruskin, I think, was both exactly right on one point and exactly wrong on a related point. He was right when he said that all great art is praise. But he was wrong when he argued that, with faith on the wane, art could be its substitute. Religion and art are fundamentally different, and one can never substitute for the other.

Some who care very much about this debate say that we are really just torn between the desire for social progress on the one hand and the demands of tradition on the other. But this is a false debate. Ezra Pound was not entirely wrong when he called on fellow artists to “make it new,” that is, to make great art in a new era retaining standards of excellence. A civilization that locks itself into only one way of creating art risks turning great art into nostalgia.

For all our commitment to remembering, the past does recede. Its specific hurts become less acute, and its ephemera—silk stockings and veiled hats, boxy automobiles and charming rural towns—become objects of nostalgia. This is the worst thing that could happen to great art, to reduce excellence to smarmy sentimentality.

In Lionel Trilling’s famous essay on Henry James’ novel *The Princess Asamassima*, the hero, Hyacinth, poor and ill-educated, is drawn to two different worlds—one of political radicalism in which great personal sacrifice is required in the name of moral good. The other is a world of aesthetic refinement in which the greatest achievements of Europe are presented for his delectation. He realizes there

is no separating the inequalities from the great works, but then how can he be true to both his radicalism and his aesthetic perceptions? The novel's greatness, in Trilling's view, comes from its refusal to answer the question clearly; the tension is potentially tragic. It is an unsettling paradox, but it seems to speak to the modern and post-modern minds.

It seems to me, culturally, we have arrived at a time for choosing. Since the 1950s, Americans have subscribed to the cult of the rebel artist, to the notion that "court art"—the Old Masters—is stifling and to the myth of bohemia and the *Salon des Refuses*; they disdain privilege, snobbery, and academic taste. The post-war rebellion of private American buyers against five centuries of "elitist" European art became almost a status symbol. The result: a downgrading of the Old Masters and a huge up-tic for Van Gogh, Monet and Picasso. But none of these motivations for inflating the price of Van Gogh and the Impressionists until they threatened to burst have had much to do with enduring artistic value.

Over the long haul, something has happened. It is fifty years since the price of Old Master and Modern pictures, at all levels of quality, was in equilibrium. The art markets are shifting back. Does that reflect a deeper shift, a slight rumble toward representation and the old values of great art? I think so. The boom has been going on for too long to be an accident. The revival in Old Master picture prices since 1993 looks like a long overdue reaction to the thirty-year dominance of Modern pictures and contemporary art.

Here is the important thing: the above thirty-year dominance has completely unbalanced any judgment about who matters and how much in terms of art history. Ours is simply not the first age in which the spirit of modernity has held the Old Masters in contempt. (The Victorians, let us remember, paid more for eleven nearly forgotten British artists than for Michelangelo or Leonardo.)

But something is happening. The days of spending more for Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Willem de Kooning and Andy Warhol, happily, are coming to an end. Painters, many in the best tradition of European Christendom, are on the comeback, painters with five hundred years of European art history behind them.

The new century, it seems, will be one, at least in part, dominated again by the Old Masters. They are now becoming the runaway success of art buying, rising faster in price than any of the fifty-year standbys. But though the trends are good, we have to remember that the contributions, such as they are, of the last fifty to seventy-five years are always with us.

The poet W. H. Auden once wrote, "The class whose vices/he pilloried was his own/now extinct, except/for lone survivors like him/who remembered its virtues."

The virtues of culture which inform the best that has been thought and said (and painted, and composed, and sculpted) well before Matthew Arnold's time remain virtues. How will they be conveyed, and appreciated, and renewed for a new century? It remains the largest historical question for art in our time. Ω