

## The Art of Revolution

by Thomas Fleming

Most Americans don't know much about art, but they do know what they don't like, namely blasphemy, pornography, and perversion. When they began to realize, in the course of 1989, that their own government, through the National Endowment for the Arts, was funding exhibitions of homosexual photographs and crucifixes in urine, they blew off enough steam to heat the entire city of Washington for several weeks.

Many sensible people wondered why a government agency would subsidize a revolution against public taste and decency. Doesn't the American system, they asked, depend upon certain broadly accepted standards of right and wrong, and aren't those standards undermined by the likes of Mr. Serrano and Mr. Mapplethorpe? Isn't there a conflict, they wondered, between the surgeon general's crusade against AIDS and the NEA's campaign to promote homosexuality? Why, in sum, would a regime deliberately set out to undermine itself?

To ask these questions is to misconceive—and misconceive seriously—the nature of political regimes. Individual political actors may be reckless or occasionally honest; entire political classes may grow too fat and lazy to look after their own interests (as they did in Eastern Europe); but no regime deliberately spends its surplus capital on projects that might lead to its own destruction. If the NEA's atrocities against public decency were only a case of misunderstanding, it would be a simple matter to persuade them of their mistake.

This sort of optimism is the grand illusion of American conservatism: if only we could enlighten the responsible

people in government and business, if only we could show them that the interest of the nation depends upon a return to "traditional values," then congressmen would join with bureaucrats, businessmen, and professors in an effort to restore an America that has not existed, for the past fifty years, anywhere outside the campaign speeches of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.

This is never going to happen. People like Senators Simon and Kennedy—indeed, most men and women in positions of power—actually like things the way they are. To be sure, they might prefer safer streets or a lower divorce rate, but not at the expense of a free and democratic people who would insist upon running their own affairs. Our rulers might not positively enjoy the idea of funding strippers as art, but any degradation is preferable to the dangers lurking in a community of artists and writers that were not lackeys of the regime. They have only to look at Czechoslovakia and shudder: why weren't the communists smart enough to subsidize Vaclav Havel?

Whenever a political community undertakes to commission or support the arts, the main object is not beauty or truth but defense of the regime. In their private capacity, tyrants and kings are free to indulge their own taste in buying paintings and in patronizing writers whose works they admire. Stalin is said to have assisted even Bulgakov, a writer he must have regarded as a political problem, and Charles II of England put up with the Earl of Rochester's impudence far longer than the poet deserved.

But what kings and tyrants do personally has to be

distinguished from their activity as public art patrons. Stalin is said to have wept when he ordered the death of Osip Mandelstam, but the poet's murder was an affair of state. The same Stalin, along with Hitler and Mussolini, created and fostered artists and architects whose works embodied the aims of their ideological regimes. If you visit the Ara Pacis of the Emperor Augustus in Rome, you will discover that it is in a neighborhood dominated by fascist architecture whose tell-tale ugly inscriptions invite an unflattering comparison with the noble lettering on the emperor's monument to peace and plenty. (You may even see my name spray-painted in black on a wall of what looks to be a fascist building, underneath a sign for Alfredo's.)

Augustus, too, along with his friends, was a great patron. He rebuilt much of Rome and befriended both Horace and Vergil. Neither of these poets was a lackey of the Augustan regime, but both willingly lent their pens to its support. Today, when we assume that all great artists are self-declared enemies of the people, it is fashionable to treat Vergil as a secret opponent of the Princes' restoration, but that is reading back our own misconception into the ancient world.

It is not only kings, tyrants, and strongmen who know how to employ art in the service of the state. The first great imperialist democracy, Athens, devoted enormous resources to rebuilding temples on the Acropolis, and we have only to think of David to realize to what extent the ideology of the Revolution permeated French art at the turn of the 19th century.

But wait. The public art of Greece and Rome is magnificent, and David, although a loathsome person, was a great painter. Even the monuments of Hitler and Stalin are popular in style and occasionally interesting as works of art. Surely I am not saying that in America our official art is the repulsive and amateurish bric-à-brac subsidized by the NEA? Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Postmodernism is not only the art of our regime, but it provides the best clues for discovering the nature of the modern American state.

Like most Americans, I do not know much about modern art. Anything after *art nouveau* (in manner if not in time) is too *nouveau* for my taste, too poor for my blood. Still, I do go to museums and sometimes do not entirely succeed in carrying out my intention of avoiding the 20th-century wings. Perversely, they always seem to be placed as an obstacle between Greek vases and the Impressionists. The opinion I have formed over the years is consistent with the popular taste of the cabdrivers and car salesmen, who continue to believe that art should be beautiful and represent things either as they are or ought to be, although as one modern artist observed of another:

things are seldom as they are  
When played upon the blue guitar.

To me and to the cabdriver who drives me to the museum, contemporary art is a) ugly, b) artless, c) offensive to the morals of most responsible stick-up men and hardworking professional killers. "Why they wanna put up stuff like that?" he asks. "Used to be you could take your family to the Whitney. But who wants to see two guys going at it? It's disgusting. Besides, look at that junk" — he points to a stack

of garbage cans he mistakes for a piece of public sculpture — "Hey, my kid could do better'n that with finger-paints."

Because I grew up speaking with the accent of a music critic being interviewed on NPR, most cabbies or barroom debaters assume they can get a rise from me by putting down highbrow art and music and books. But I agree with them. I have always agreed with them, even when I was the sort of person I sound like. But, I ask them, what is the point? Assume for the moment that the effect of modern art on most of us is not unintentional; what would that tell us?

Take ugly. If art is ugly, if we come to believe that all art is ugly and that beauty really is in the eye of the beholder, then there is no chance that ordinary people might enjoy painting, music, and poetry. In earlier centuries, most concert-goers came to appreciate music through performances of contemporary works. Mozart's audiences did not attend *The Marriage of Figaro* and sigh: "This is OK, but it ain't Monteverdi." Beethoven and Brahms were not just a big success: they served to define music for their contemporaries.

In the United States and Western Europe, the last composers to attract such popular attention were probably Puccini and Richard Strauss, although from what I can gather Prokofiev and Shostakovich made a powerful impression on Russian audiences. There is a wonderful passage somewhere in Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle* where the Zeks eagerly await a radio broadcast of a Shostakovich symphony. In my lifetime I have never experienced that sort of eager anticipation for a new work of a favorite writer or composer, except for the period when Anthony Powell was putting out the volumes of *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

And in painting, my experience with modern and post-modern art has been so dispiriting that it largely put me off going to exhibitions of contemporary artists. Those with more public spirit who do go and put themselves under the influence of contemporary masters will inexorably find themselves drawn into the moral and aesthetic universe of Mr. Warhol and Mr. Serrano, a bleak and disoriented landscape of joyless homosexuality, pointless violence, and malevolent impiety toward all received wisdoms. It is the milieu of proles and street people, of the cowards and lackeys who would take no risks that might interrupt the monotonous round of expensive ethnic cuisines and disembodied orgasms. For the present, it is *Brave New World* spiced with *A Clockwork Orange*, although there is already an undercurrent of *Bladerunner* that bubbles up like an overflowing sewer to disturb the revelry in a world that is postmodern, postfamilial, postmoral, and postpolitical.

What is the creed of state postmodernism? Something might be put together by a student willing to wade through a stack of grant proposals or to read copies of journals subsidized by the NEA and CCLM, but the results would be misleadingly vivid: sado-masochism, child-molesting, and coprophagia are in, monogamy is out. Violent revolution and pacifism, tribalism and universalism are celebrated with a passionate pluralism that can embrace everything but loyalty and restraint. It is a misleading picture, because the writers of these manifestos are for the most part quiet little drudges addicted to prescription drugs and nonviolent (i.e., safe) protest. Our ideological state promotes their delusions and eccentricities in the same way that the Soviets used to

trot out official dissidents like Yevtushenko to prove that they were really open-minded. American radicals are, in a literal sense, the loyal opposition, because they support the cultural and moral goals of the regime: social dissolution, decay of community, and the sense of helplessness and anomie that encourages dependency. Where's the danger in that? You have only to read their poems to realize how really harmless they are.

But much of this degradation might have been accomplished through serious and technically proficient works of art. Why the insistence upon funding incompetent garbage? Ah, but here is the essential point. There have always been rakes and devils in the fellowship of great artists and writers. In modern times, it seems sometimes as if there are no good men in a literature dominated by Shelley and Byron, Baudelaire and Gide and Lawrence. But rakes have a way of reforming, and men who take great risks are sometimes tempted to take the ultimate risk by putting their faith in God. As Screwtape tells the audience at the Tempters' Training College dinner: "The great . . . sinners are made out of the very same material as those horrible phenomena the great Saints." Rochester repented, and Baudelaire's later poems could convert a legion of minor devils. The nastiest writer of this century, Céline, was after all a reactionary rightist.

No, you simply cannot count on a craftsman of any kind. An honest carpenter or a competent poet will both rebel against the mediocrity and cowardice required by an ideological regime. Edward Abbey was a liberal, after all, but when he believed something he could not bring himself to lie about it. Besides, an important aspect of today's official art is the cabdriver's reaction: "My kid could do better." Of course she could, and that means that standards of excellence do not really exist. All of us really are equal, not just in the sight of God, but in our talents and abilities. We are all creative, aren't we, all endowed with the inalienable right of expressing our inner selves, whether it is by collecting junk or flashing our private parts in public. When there are no objective standards, we are all on the same level until a panel of experts bends down from the sky and gilds our pile of excrement with golden grants from the NEA or from one of the countless private foundations that exist only to subvert the moral and aesthetic order. Then upon these poor ephemera of humanity "a heaven-sent ray of sunlight falls and life flows like honey."

SKIP THIS PARAGRAPH if you are in a hurry, because I am going to insert the usual mealy-mouthed and equivocating qualifications that are required whenever an American speaks his mind. Yes, of course the NEA and Guggenheim and MacArthur occasionally slip up or get pressured into rewarding a writer or artist with real merit, and of course there is an occasional honest and intelligent person driven by poverty and despair into accepting a job with a government agency, and of course I have friends, more than I like to admit, who have sat on the councils of the NEH and NEA (in one case both) and whose intentions I regard as entirely honorable and praiseworthy, although I can hardly cite an instance where their presence has done enough good to offset the mere fact that their participation lends legitimacy to an illegitimate operation. "But I can see to it that some of the money is spent wisely," they argue, "and it would be

worse if we let the crazies dominate the council." This is what I call the humane-concentration-camp-guard argument: "Think how much worse it would be if we let the Nazis run the camps. At least I can treat the prisoners with some decency and humanity." Go ahead, I admire your strength of will in humbling yourselves in the seats of power, and I stand in awe of the way you can plug your nose while attacking the Augean stables with a Handi-wipe.

Bad poetry and obscene photographs are only the most revealing instruments of the official propaganda. Government education, from Headstart to graduate school, sends a similar message. Apart from the scientists and their apprentices, whose penchant for truth we indulge both out of necessity and out of religious awe, the people in charge of American schooling are simply the less flamboyant counterparts of the artists. They are equally committed to mediocrity (which they call equality), incompetence (in pursuit of equality), and dishonesty (in the service of equality). The present generation of humanities professors can scarcely recall what a real man of learning is like, although they must have run into a few doddering examples in their student days, and by the year 2000 the art and discipline that went into making a genuine scholar or man of letters will be a historical curiosity, like stained glass. There are exceptions, but they are as rare as grammatical Latin must have been in the sixth century.

Like scholarship, poetry and painting and the other high arts were once traditional skills handed down from master to disciple and from father to son across the generations. They were not far removed, in spirit or status, from humbler crafts. The Roman artists' guild, the *Academia di S. Luca*, included mere craftsmen (such as gilders) among its members in the days of Caravaggio, and in later years it continued to induct them as second-class members.

Art as a skill or craft partakes of the guild mentality, which at its best sets quality above profit. Since the 19th century, however, artists and writers have seen themselves not as members of a craft guild but as participants—or enemies—of the marketplace. Some writers, like Dickens and Trollope, became successful entrepreneurs; others rebelled against the notion that "*to kalon* is decreed in the marketplace," but until this century the rebellion most often took the form of a nostalgic longing for an older Christian community of the Middle Ages or early Renaissance. This is the thread that runs from the Romantics through the aesthetes and decadents to the generation of Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Eliot (to say nothing of their older contemporaries, Belloc and Chesterton).

The First World War destroyed a great many illusions, and *l'art pour l'art* was vaporized along with the conviction that civilization could somehow be restored. Nonetheless, the 20's and 30's seethed with possibilities. The movement most pregnant with circumstance was not the reactionary modernism of Eliot, Pound, and the agrarians, but the progressive modernism of Dada and futurism, whose leaders resolutely turned their backs on the past and set out to overturn all aesthetic and moral conventions. To realize how uncreative an age we live in, one only has to compare the most outrageous stunts of the past twenty-five years with the manifestos and projects of Tristan Tzara and Marinetti.

What was fresh and impudent in the 20's is now as "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" as all the other cultural "uses of the world."

The final result of the cultural revolution that coincided with World War I is that a writer or painter today has two paths before him: a profitable career as capitalist artist or a comfortable sinecure as artist-rebel. If he decides to become a capitalist, then he will with any luck crank out a series of Stephen King novels or society portraits like so many microwave dinners: tasteless, insubstantial, and liable to turn a delicate stomach but, at the same time, immensely profitable to the patent-holders. (Notice, by the way, how popular novels are advertised as "the new Barbara Cartland" or the latest "Jay McInerney" as if they were automobiles.)

The other career path is the professional antisocial rebel. This means, in practice, taking on the government as patron: university jobs, major grants, tax-subsidized publications, exhibitions, and lecture tours. All that is required of you is to parrot the lies of the regime: the American family is a sick institution, Western man is racist and sexist, Christianity has poisoned the water and killed off the whales, etc., etc. The solution to each of these crises is more money for social agencies, more money to fight racism and pollution, and—do not forget—more money for "the Arts"—a relatively new term which very nearly gives the game away by lumping together poetry and sculpture and macrame as so many officially licensed diversions. And with more money

come more and bigger government agencies to tell us how to live our lives and increased power for a managerial/executive class that functions as our more powerful analogue of the crumbling Soviet *nomenklatura*.

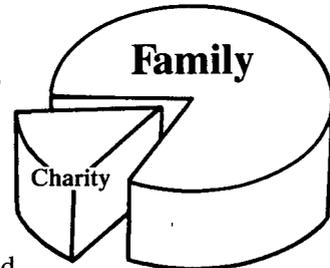
It is for this if no other reason that national elections change nothing. It will not matter whether we send Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals to Washington, until we find candidates willing to challenge the regime itself. This will mean pulling the plug, or at least short-circuiting the agitprop machine—the NEA, the NEH, the Department of Education, and all their satellite agencies in the states. It would also mean eliminating the federal presence in colleges and universities and reconverting all our schools from indoctrination centers to places of learning. If higher education turns out to be too expensive for most students, perhaps they will discover how fundamentally useless is an American college degree.

Some artists and writers with a gift for teaching would remain in the academy; others, once they could no longer get their fix of "money for nothing," could either turn professional and produce salable works or else find patrons or sponsors. Frankly, I am not too worried. There will always be a market for pornography and blasphemy, and in a decentralized culture intelligent rich people might once again learn to trust their own taste and judgment, which will always be superior to the official standards of "good enough for government work." ◊

## THE WISDOM OF THE PLANNED GIFT

There are a variety of ways to give to educational and charitable organizations, like The Rockford Institute, publisher of *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*. Most people make outright gifts which result in a "charitable deduction" from their taxable income in a given year. But there are other ways to give that can preserve income or assets for a donor and his beneficiaries, avoid capital gains and estate taxes, and benefit the Institute or other charities of your choice. These are often referred to as "planned gifts."

**Pooled Income Funds** provide income to a donor or his beneficiary and can be established at the \$5,000 level. The amount in the fund can be added to each year, and the amount of income depends on the performance of the pooled fund. This fund has both high income and growth-oriented investments, and the return is generally much higher than stock dividends. The amount of charitable tax deduction for the gift depends on the fair market value of the assets contributed (there is no capital gains tax on stock contributions) and is related to the age of the donor or beneficiaries. There is no capital gains tax to the donor on the increased value of the fund over time. Upon the death of the donor or beneficiary, the assets go to the Institute and bypass estate taxes.



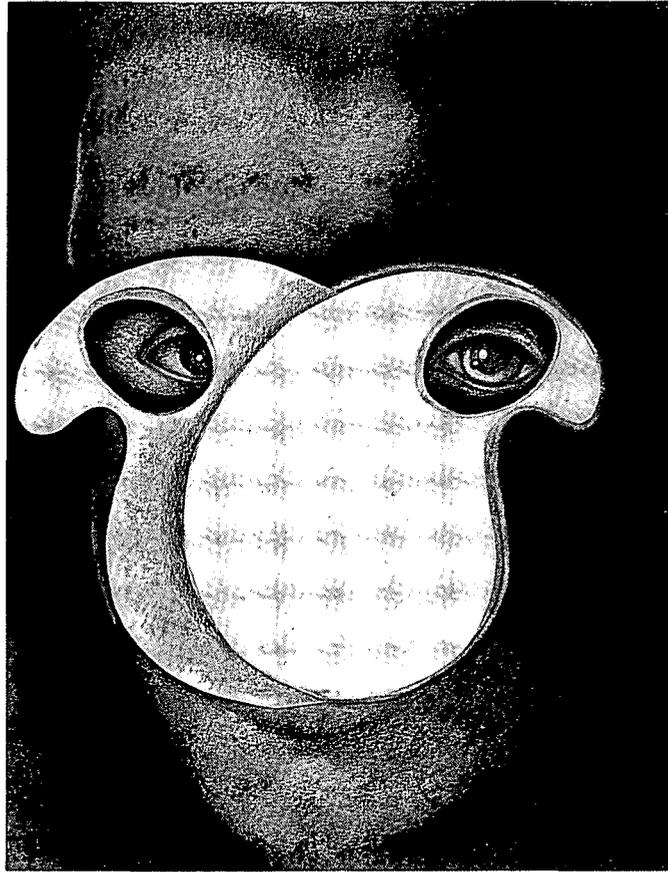
Legacy Program, The Rockford Institute, 934 North Main Street, Rockford, IL 61103

- Please send me general information on the various "Planned Giving" options.
- Please send me information on the Institute's **Pooled Income Fund**.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

If you have a specific asset, such as stocks, that you are considering for a contribution, and if you would like the Institute to evaluate the financial and tax implications for your gift, please include the following information:

SS # \_\_\_\_\_ SS# (SPOUSE) \_\_\_\_\_  
 COST OF ASSET \_\_\_\_\_ ESTIMATED MARKET VALUE \_\_\_\_\_



Anna Mysek-Wodecki

## Art Is Always Political When the Government Starts Giving Grants

by George Garrett

*"In the background of the entire tedious debate over the NEA, the First Amendment has loomed, misunderstood and abused as usual, claimed by some as justification for their right to express a preference for causing pain to others during the sex act and asserted by others as the basis for a constitutional right to receive federal grants."*

—Raymond Solokov

Speaking of the subject of censorship and the arts in general, and, more specifically, the whole affair in these recent months (filling many newspaper pages) about the problem of the American taxpayer and the government's support or nonsupport of the arts; speaking of freedom and of censorship, then, particularly, here and now, represented

*George Garrett is Henry Hoyns Professor of English at the University of Virginia. His latest novel, Entered From the Sun, is due out this fall from Doubleday.*

by the ways and means, the action and inaction of the National Endowment for the Arts, hereinafter called the NEA; speaking of these things—and why not? Everybody else is—I do, in fact, have a few things to say.

First off, I need to admit honestly to the angle from which I view things, the point of view with which I bear witness. Besides being a part-time writer and a full-time teacher, I am by now listed here and there as a Democrat and an Episcopalian. A Democrat of New Deal origins and versions. An Episcopalian who is happier with the language and theology of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, but who, for the time being, is obedient to the wit and wisdom of our bishops.

As a Democrat I can hardly pretend to argue against any and all kinds of government involvement with the arts. As a Roosevelt/Truman Democrat, however, I am inclined, indeed required to trust the people in their wisdom, to honor the thoughts and feelings of what has now come to be called