

Souls, there has emerged “a new type of East European literary hero: skeptical, yet not unprincipled; aware of the absurdity of the situation in which ‘the other Europe’ has been forcibly placed, but remarkably

free of self-pity; conscious of his nationality but alert to the needs of other ‘political losers.’” Thus Eastern Europeans have distanced themselves from both their Russian and Western European counterparts.

Art and the Decline of Nations

“Counterfeiting Nature: Artistic Innovation and Cultural Crisis in Renaissance Venice” by Arthur Steinberg and Jonathan Wylie, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Jan. 1990), 102 Rackham Bldg., Univ. of Mich., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109-1070.

How many times has the story been repeated? A society slowly rises to greatness and then, just as it passes its peak, experiences a spectacular flowering of the arts.

Venice during the early 16th century was such a place. Exhausted by decades of war with the Ottoman Empire, it then confronted the League of Cambrai—including Florence, Spain, and France. The League handed the Venetians a disastrous defeat at Agnadello in 1509.

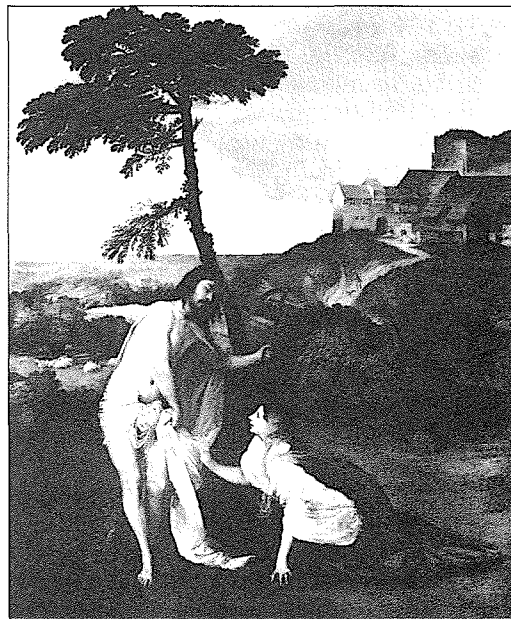
Out of this turmoil grew one of the great flowers of Venetian art: the “natural painting” of Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516), Giorgione (c. 1478–1510), and Titian (c. 1480–1576). Steinberg and Wylie, both historians at MIT, argue that this flowering was no accident.

The patriarchs of Venice proudly thought of themselves as having a special link to God. Venice was known as *la sancta città* (the holy city), and legend had it that it was founded on Annunciation Day, the same day on which Adam was created, Mary impregnated, and Christ crucified. The city’s misfortunes thus cast doubt not only on her favored status but on “the very souls of her political and economic elite.”

To continue the illusion of Venetian greatness, the city fathers went on a civic spending spree, creating a huge market for art. Venetian artists soon discovered that the newly developed oil paints allowed the painter to work more quickly and produce more pictures than traditional egg-based tempera paints did. And oil allowed artists to achieve much more vivid colors and life-like effects. Almost too life-like, in fact. The main subjects of Venetian art were sa-

cred figures such as the Virgin Mary, and if they could be depicted as part of profane reality, the authors observe, their “sacredness became ambiguous or even risked disappearing entirely.”

Bellini tried to solve the problem by surrounding his sacred figures with cherubs and halos, and by placing them on an entirely different plane. Invariably, the result was really two (or more) pictures: a Madonna in the foreground, for example, and a completely detached landscape in the background. It was left to Giorgione and especially Titian to create the new style of



In Titian's *Noli Me Tangere* (*Do Not Touch Me*) of 1511, the sacred foreground is set apart by Christ's motion away from Mary Magdalene and by the bush, the tree, and other pictorial markers.

“natural painting.” Titian found several ways to blend the planes in his pictures far more naturally. His greatest innovation was to emphasize the natural qualities of the sacred figures in the foreground, often by painting them in motion. The effect, paradoxically, was to set them apart.

Natural painting was a critical and commercial success, say the authors, because it “opened a fresh avenue of mediation between God and men” in a city whose citi-

zens feared that God had turned His back on them. One writer of the day said that Titian’s pictures “have a touch of divinity in them . . . his colors are infused as though God has put the paradise of our bodies in them, not painted, but made holy and glorified by his hands.”

Alas, the Venetians had to content themselves with fine art. For while Venice regained some of its lost empire, it never recaptured its status as a world power.

What Makes A Masterpiece?

“Masterpieces and the Museum” by Arthur C. Danto, in *Grand Street* (Winter 1990), 50 Riverside Dr., New York, N.Y. 10024.

When philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto attended a recent symposium on the concept of the masterpiece, he was astonished to find that all of the invited scholars and museum curators were reluctant to talk about the subject. One gave a clever lecture on “monsterpieces,” another lamented the fact that advertisers had co-opted and degraded the term “masterpiece,” but nobody wanted to discuss how one might define a masterpiece.

The reason, Danto suspects, is that the museum, like the university, has become an arena of intense political and cultural conflict, and the museum’s role in certifying masterpieces by deciding which art is of “museum quality” has become highly controversial. The museum world is experiencing “a moment of upheaval and indeed of revolution.”

The revolutionaries are of two kinds. Some are radical critics who believe that the very idea of the masterpiece “is hopelessly intertwined with white male oppression” and ought to be done away with entirely. Such a step, they believe, would throw open the doors of museums to women and minority artists engaged in creating “socially useful” art.

The second kind of critic seeks not to overthrow the concept of the masterpiece (and thus the artistic authority of the museum) but to win representation for previously excluded artists by revising the definition of a masterpiece.

Politics! scream outraged conservatives.

Precisely, answers Danto. In his view, much of the work of museums has always been political. The first modern museum, the Musée Napoléon, was created to house the spoils of Napoleon’s conquests. Thus, says Danto, the “museum entered modern consciousness as an emblem of power,” including the power to dictate which art should be displayed, and why. When Napoleon’s power waned and curators had to decide which works to transfer from the Musée Napoléon to the Louvre, they chose to keep art that would advance the “moral education of the citizenry.” This was just one of the many different moral visions that have informed curators’ decisions in different times and places.

But Danto insists that this does not mean, as some of the more radical critics argue, that the whole concept of the masterpiece is arbitrary.

Danto believes there are two kinds of masterpieces. Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, for example, is a work of pure genius, which touches “our essential universal humanity.” Even the tongue-tied curators at Danto’s symposium would admit that such works are masterpieces. A second kind of masterpiece is created by the master, who labors within the rules and conventions of his art to produce, after much effort, his own masterpiece. Unlike the Sistine Chapel, with its timeless appeal, this kind of masterpiece tells us about the values of a particular time and place.

This is the door through which Danto