

“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

seems to think that works advocated by the second variety of critic can be admitted to the museum. For many years, curators

have unthinkingly applied politicized definitions of the masterpiece, he suggests. Now it is time to apply them thoughtfully.

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## OTHER NATIONS

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### *Debt and Democracy*

"Democracy and Economic Crisis: The Latin American Experience" by Karen L. Remmer, in *World Politics* (April 1990), 17 Ivy Lane, Princeton, N.J. 08544.

Nobody ever seems to say anything about Latin America's new democracies without attaching warning words like "fragile," "fledgling," or "struggling." The assumption among academics and journalists appears to be that the newly elected leaders of Brazil, Chile, and other nations will find it much harder to deal with economic adversity, especially the debt crisis, than did their authoritarian predecessors. Ultimately, the theory goes, the need to placate various constituencies will handicap elected leaders to such an extent that democracy itself may fail.

All of this strikes Remmer, a political scientist at the University of New Mexico, as very curious. Since the debt crisis began in 1982, she notes, not a single South American democracy has fallen, but six authoritarian regimes (notably, in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile) have. The story is much the same in Central America and the Caribbean. "It might be more appropriate to emphasize the fragility of 'old' authoritarianism rather than the weakness of 'new' democracy," Remmer says.

Going one step farther, she set out to compare the economic performance of 10 Latin nations between 1982 and 1988. Two (Colombia and Venezuela) were "old" de-

mocracies; Chile and Paraguay were authoritarian during the whole period; six others underwent a transition to democracy. Using such gauges as unemployment, real wages, and inflation, she found no statistically significant differences between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Overall, however, the two "old" democracies were the best performers. They did not get as deeply into debt in the first place as did their authoritarian counterparts.

People who are surprised by the success of the Latin democracies, Remmer says, forget several things. Since 1982, democrats and dictators alike have been forced to rely on aid from organizations like the World Bank, which has limited their freedom of choice. But there are also many varieties of democracy, from Peruvian populism to Ecuadorian conservatism, which produce different approaches to economics—and different results. And finally, few popularly-elected leaders in Latin America feel free—or obliged—to buy popularity. Remmer says that they "are aware that the rise and fall of democracy in Latin America have corresponded less to the whims of the voting majority than to the concerted opposition of business and military elites."

### *A Beur's-Eye View of France*

"The 'Beurs,' Children of North-African Immigrants in France: The Issue of Integration" by Azouz Begag, in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* (Spring 1990), Western Wash. Univ., Bellingham, Wash. 98225.

Two centuries after the Revolution, France is facing a challenge that the partisans of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* could hardly have imagined: the integration of some three million people of North Afri-

can extraction into French society.

Until the 1980s, France was able to maintain the fiction that the Tunisian, Moroccan, and Algerian immigrants who began arriving during the 1950s were only