

No Modern Art, Please, We're British

At the end of this century, Britain will open the Bankside Gallery, its first museum dedicated to modern art. George Walden, a Tory member of Parliament, ponders Britain's belated attention to modernism in *Prospect* (July 1996).

One reason for this failure of imagination was that modernism was not a British discovery; those who practiced it, such as the Vorticists, were sneered at as the provincial agents of internationalism. In rejecting modernist art we behaved like the ministry of defense when it declined to adopt the rifled barrels favored by its allies because they were not invented here. The fact that rifled barrels shoot straighter, or that modernism's early phase hit the nerve of the century with impact and precision, was no recommendation to the colonels of convention.

To ministers and civil servants the opening of the new gallery will seem futuristic—a daring innovation “putting Britain at the forefront of contemporary art” (one could draft the opening speeches). A century late, we see ourselves as contemporary—even a touch futuristic. Whatever one's view of Bankside or of modernism, the facts are simple: the new gallery will be dedicated to the art characteristic of the previous century, whose principles were laid down before the first world war by artists of greater brilliance and inventive genius than any living today.

We came late to modern art, as we did to sex; we are still a little over-excited about both.

Policing the Art Trade

“Arresting the Flow of Stolen Art,” by Amy Schwartz, in *Asian Art and Culture* (Winter 1996), Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.

The worldwide traffic in stolen and illegally exported art and artifacts has reached an estimated \$2 to 6 billion per year. Efforts to control this flourishing trade, notes Schwartz, a *Washington Post* writer, raise some surprisingly complicated issues. An international accord drafted in Rome last year, requiring documentation of the provenance of all art and artifacts bought and sold on the international market, has run into strong opposition from dealers, auction houses, and many major museums in Europe and the United States.

The accord, drafted under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), would require owners to show documentation of an object's provenance. Owners who exercised “due diligence” in trying to determine that provenance and were required to return the object would be compensated—and the dealer who sold it to them might have to foot the bill. This prospect alarms dealers, who were already disturbed by a U.S. federal court ruling in an unusual 1989 case. The court ordered a

dealer to return four mosaics she had bought from dubious parties in an airport lounge in Switzerland to the Cypriot hierarchs who had sued for them—and she was out \$1.1 million.

Museums and private collectors worry that the accord could lead to the removal of priceless art from their walls. Museums and dealers are already keenly—and unhappily—aware of a stunning precedent: the Metropolitan Museum of Art's reluctant return to Turkey in 1994 of the Lydian Hoard—several hundred sixth-century B.C. silver treasures looted from Anatolia in the 1960s. There were special circumstances involved, Schwartz notes, but even so, “a psychological barrier” fell. For the first time, an “art-source” country had successfully laid claim to objects held in a major museum.

Dealers traditionally have been reluctant to press hard to determine the provenance of their wares. They claim, Schwartz says, that most works of art on the market “have been out of the countries of origin since well before the era when those coun-

tries started passing laws that banned all export of antique objects, and well before the era when documentation was provided or expected.” Most artifacts, dealers claim, have little scientific value. (Archaeologists, however, say that is true only if the artifacts are removed from their original sites.)

The United States, virtually alone among art “consumer” nations, ratified a 1970 UNESCO convention, subsequently enacting the 1983 Cultural Property and Implementation Act. It also agreed with

Mexico to ban almost all imports of pre-Columbian artifacts. Even so, the destruction of archaeological sites in Latin America continues, as the trade, according to dealers, simply moved overseas.

Some specialists think the 1995 accord, if ratified by enough key countries, could drive the trade in undocumented objects underground. Schwartz, however, believes that tougher regulation might well prompt both dealers and buyers to behave a little more ethically.

OTHER NATIONS

The Americanization of Mexico

A Survey of Recent Articles

There is a growing division in Mexican society, and it is not along the usual regional, class, or ideological lines, reports Jorge G. Castañeda, a political scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. The split, he writes in *Foreign Affairs* (July–Aug. 1996), is between the expanding minority of Mexicans—perhaps one-fifth to one-fourth of the country’s 95 million people—who are “plugged into the U.S. economy” and the majority who are not. “It has become the most significant rift in Mexico’s society,” he believes.

The millions of migrant workers “who toil in the fields, valleys, and sweatshops of California and Florida and the restaurants and flower shops of New York and Chicago” are on the U.S. side of this divide, he notes, and more than 10 million Mexicans live directly off the nearly \$4 billion these workers send home every year. Then there are the Mexican businesspeople, workers, accountants, and lawyers involved in the rapidly growing export sector. The *maquiladoras* (border factories) employ more than 600,000 Mexicans, and the automobile industry more than 500,000. Other export industries—steel, garments, cement, mining, and glass—are thriving, too. The tourism industry employs an additional 600,000 Mexicans. And countless other Mexicans have various other ties to the U.S. economy.

Enough Mexicans are benefiting from American ties, and enough others are hoping, “however unrealistically,” to benefit, Castañeda says, to make a second Mexican

revolution (the first occurred in 1910) virtually impossible. These fortunate Mexicans, he believes, are becoming “isolated from much of their country’s economic tribulations and relatively complacent about its political travails.”

Nora Lustig, author of *Mexico: The Remaking of an Economy* (1993), writing in the *Brookings Review* (Spring 1996), is more sanguine. Since the peso’s collapse in December 1994 plunged the country into crisis, the economy has stabilized and even recovered somewhat, she observes. The forecasts for this year are for a modest growth in output of two to three percent. President Ernesto Zedillo “has repeatedly stated, and taken initial steps on, his commitment” to encourage a separation between the government and the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), turn more power over to state and local governments, and strengthen the traditionally weak congress and courts. He appointed a member of the main opposition party as attorney general. Zedillo also has indicated he intends to break with tradition and not handpick his successor. Mexico’s congress is discussing political reform.

“I think the emergence of civil society in Mexico has been the driving force” behind the push toward democratization, Peter M. Ward, director of the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, told journalist Suzanne Bilello.

The 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, which toppled hundreds of buildings and