

Vermeer's Mission

Why did the 21 paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) recently exhibited at Washington's National Gallery of Art excite so much enthusiasm? James F. Cooper, editor of *American Arts Quarterly* (Fall 1995), offers an explanation.

It is possible, of course, to enjoy Vermeer's art purely on the aesthetic level. . . . But, ultimately, what one takes away from a Vermeer painting is a sense of the artist's sincere, humble desire to reconnect with the sacred, expressed fiercely on canvas without consideration of profit, career, or reputation. The small output of work during Vermeer's lifetime (only 36 known canvases), his reluctance to show them to potential clients who might not appreciate their spirituality, his dedication to craft and excellence, all attest to his mission.

This mission Vermeer discovered only through trial and error. He began as a painter of historical and religious pictures in the grand manner, only to discover that the spiritual and aesthetic qualities he sought in his work were to be found in commonplace objects within the Dutch home. View of Delft (c. 1661) depicts Vermeer's home town bathed in a translucent glow. Girl with a Red Hat (c. 1665) is one of the great portraits of Western art, rightly world famous through a myriad of reproductions. Even the most sensitive reproduction, published on the finest European presses, however, cannot fully capture the mysterious spiritual essence of Woman Holding a Balance [c. 1664]. No reproduction to date has captured the quality of light that shafts gently through the darkness of this humble Dutch interior, illuminating the frame of the window with a touch of gold that resembles part of a cross, and transfiguring the figure of a woman lost in thought as she holds a small weighing scale in her hand. This light, filtering through a window curtain, transforms a Dutch housewife into an archetypal figure of the Virgin Mary. A reproduction of The Last Judgment above her (a work owned by Vermeer, who supplemented his income as an art dealer) reinforces the religious allegory to weighing souls at the Last Judgment. A simple scene of a woman weighing pearls has been transformed by Vermeer's hand into one of profound, spiritual significance.

however, have simply chosen the other horn of Socrates' dilemma. They insist that the critics are artists, but, at the same time, they say they remain critics, whose works somehow arise from Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare. This having it both ways may not

bother postmodernists, but it does worry other sorts of literary critics, Surette notes—and Rorty has not shown them a way out of the dilemma. Instead, Surette warns, the much-admired philosopher is simply trying “to lay down the law” for literature.

OTHER NATIONS

Turkey's TV Revolution

“Packaging Islam: Cultural Politics on the Landscape of Turkish Commercial Television”
by Ayşe Öncü, in *Public Culture* (Fall 1995), 124 Wieboldt Hall, Univ. of Chicago,
1010 E. 59th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

For most of the 20th century, official Turkey has resolutely kept Islam in the closet. On state-controlled TV, evidence of the faith was seen only in weekly 15-minute homilies delivered by a state official in secular garb, and in limited mosque broadcasts

on officially designated holidays. The overall impression from what was shown (and not shown) by the Turkish Television and Radio Authority (TRT), reports Öncü, a sociologist at Bogaziçi University in Istanbul, was that Islam remained “a primordial force” requir-

ing vigilance “lest its dark face reappear.”

All of that began to change with the advent of commercial broadcasting in 1990 and a clever 1991 TV ad campaign by Turkey’s long-standing Islamist political party. The Refah (Welfare) Party had been seen as a marginal religious organization representing cranky traditionalists, especially backward small-town shopkeepers. The ads, however, Öncü says, put a new face on the Islamist movement, one that was “urban, literate, middle class.” Quotations from the Koran were scarce, and Refah’s constituents, she observes, “were not the turbaned women and bearded dark men of the imagination, but everyday people.” The only woman wearing a turban was a student who told the viewers she had been expelled from her university for wearing a headscarf. A voice-over promised that when Refah was in power, no one would face discrimination because of

her beliefs and practices.

Today, Öncü says, Islam is everywhere on Turkish TV, “part of the issue-saturated culture of commercial television.” (Seven private channels now compete among themselves and with TRT.) Islamic spokesmen appear in TV forums to present “the Islamist viewpoint.” News commentators, politicians, and other secular figures advert to ominous global religio-political conspiracies involving Saudi finance capital or Iranian fundamentalism.

Islam is now seen, Öncü says, as “a problem that demands public awareness, encouraging audiences to clarify their own positions and take a stand.” Although not the sole factor, Islam’s TV presence undoubtedly contributed to the Refah Party’s stunning showing in last December’s elections: it won 158 seats in the 550-member parliament, more than any other party.

The Suicide of Cambodian Democracy

“Cambodia’s Fading Hopes” by Julio A. Jeldres, in *Journal of Democracy* (Jan. 1996), 1101 15th St. N.W., Ste. 802, Washington, D.C. 20005.

After almost two decades of terror, repression, and genocide, Cambodia held United Nations-supervised elections in 1993 that were supposed to be a landmark on the road to democracy. Nearly three years later, that destination still seems very far off, reports Jeldres, an Australian who served on the staff of Prince (now King) Norodom Sihanouk from 1981 to 1991.

In the May 1993 elections, the royalist FUNCINPEC party—founded by Sihanouk in 1981 to fight the country’s Vietnamese conquerors and now led by one of his sons, Prince Norodom Ranariddh—promised national reconciliation and a battle against corruption, and it scored a major victory. The party won 45 percent of the vote and 58 of the 120 Constituent Assembly seats. The Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), successor to the party created by Vietnam’s communist regime to rule as its proxy in

Cambodia after the 1978 Vietnamese invasion, finished only a strong second. A new constitution subsequently restored the monarchy.

But the CPP, by threatening civil war, “strong-armed” Ranariddh into a coalition government, with the prince as “first prime minister” and CPP leader Hun Sen as “second prime minister.” Much of FUNC-



Reconstruction efforts are under way in Phnom Penh; these Buddha statues have been made for use in rebuilt temples.