

was on the verge of conversion, but, in fact, the Mughals were using the Christian art for their own purposes.

As Muslims presiding over a predominantly Hindu people, Akbar and his son Jahangir (r. 1605–27), who succeeded him, encouraged religious tolerance and “forged a syncretic ideology of kingship that would reflect the multicultural makeup of their growing empire, while promoting their own unifying image as divinely chosen rulers” for the new Muslim millennium that began during 1591–92. They used the Catholic art to provide a visual manifestation of this ideology.

Jesus and Mary figure prominently in the Koran and are revered in traditional Islam,

Bailey notes. “It is quite possible that the Mughals chose Catholic imagery because Islam itself did not provide an iconographic tradition capable of combating the visually potent pantheon of Hindu deities.”

Whether in official settings or more intimate ones, the Catholic-inspired murals were meant for only a limited audience, Bailey observes. “Christian devotional pictures were painted on a small scale and never appeared on the exteriors of buildings, perhaps so as not to offend the religious sensibilities of the general public.” The Mughals’ murals, he says, were intended only for those “sufficiently immersed in palace culture” to understand their syncretic message.

Big Brother Architecture

Metropolis (Aug.–Sept. 1998) contributing editor Michael Sorkin sees little reason to celebrate such acclaimed New Urbanist developments as Celebration, near Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

Like Modernism, New Urbanism overestimates architecture’s power to influence behavior. The idea is that replicating the forms of the New England town green will move citizens in the direction of the good, democratic conduct that presumably arose from such arrangements in the past. (Never mind the witches being tortured just out of the frame.) But in the same way that Disneyland’s miniaturized, ersatz nostalgia relies on a huge apparatus of manipulation and control, New Urbanist towns are underpinned by a labyrinth of restrictive covenants, building regulations, homeowners association codes of behavior, and engineered demographic sterility. Restrictions range from bans on children and stipulated house colors to limits on what can be grown in the front yard, as well as other exclusions that cannot be placed so explicitly in writing. Robert A. M. Stern, Celebration’s planner, elevates such rigid controls to the status of democratic principle; quoted in a recent New York Times article, he makes the Orwellian claim, “Regimentation can release you.” The reality, though, reminds me of the great Patrick McGooohan TV series, The Prisoner. Behind the delightful facades of that glorious folly, Portmeirion, lay a sinister apparatus of imprisonment.

Nashville’s New Tune

“In Defense of Music Row” by Bruce Feiler, in the *Oxford American* (1998: No.21–22), P.O. Box 1156, Oxford, Miss. 38655.

Most country music critics condemn the sounds coming out of Nashville these days as watered-down, commercially driven, country pop-rock drivel. Country music, they complain, has lost touch with its roots—with hardscrabble places such as southern Appalachia and the Texas flatlands, and the folks who live there. But the critics, argues Feiler, author of *Dreaming Out Loud* (1998),

miss the big picture: country music today simply reflects changes in the South—changes that, for the most part, have made the region a better place to live.

Today, even the people of southern Appalachia and the Texas flatlands have lost touch with their roots, Feiler says. “Regional identity is less important than ever. In an era when computers, chain stores, and cable

television dominate American life, the sense of isolation and disenfranchisement that was once central to the South has all but disappeared.” The old stereotypes of “barefoot, pregnant women and toothless, racist men” have receded, and other Americans are finding the warm and prosperous South an attractive place to live: more than 20 million have moved to the region since 1970.

“Country music has never had as its mandate the preservation of rural life,” Feiler points out, and Nashville has always had its eye on the bottom line. Consumers—not critics, artists, or recording executives—determine what constitutes country music, he says. And the definition has changed over the decades, from bluegrass in the 1940s, to

honky-tonk, the Nashville Sound, New Traditionalism, and today’s sound.

And the latest music is not all bad, Feiler says. “To be sure, much of what’s heard on country radio is the worst representation of Music Row—and the South. It’s bland, homogenized, and unadventurous.” But the good news, he says, is the sophistication of the works of many contemporary artists, including Mary Chapin Carpenter, the Mavericks, and superstars such as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. Twenty years from now, he predicts, future critics will be complaining that their contemporary country music cannot hold a candle to the music of those artists—“that is, to the Nashville of the ’90s.”

A Walker in the ‘Ashcan’ City

The late distinguished critic Alfred Kazin (1915–98) recalls in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1998) when artists discovered his city—and he discovered *them*.



Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair (1912), by John Sloan

For American artists in the first half of the century, New York itself was the great new subject. New York painters seemed to love the city more than New York writers did; the painters were tuned in to the passing show, where Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and later embittered leftwing realists like Michael Gold saw only victims and oppressors. I had no positive city images until I discovered them in art museums. At the old Whitney on Eighth Street, I found Reginald Marsh’s paintings of Fourteenth Street shoppers; at the

Met, I found John Sloan’s neighborly Greenwich Village backyards with prowling cats and laundry drying on the line, and his full-figured secretaries in red hats just released from the office and rollicking under the curve that the Sixth Avenue El made at Thirtieth Street.

There was a certain haste to the painters whom the officially approved artists at the National Academy of Design derogatively called the Ashcan School. This reflected the timely discovery of New York as a subject. Many of the Ashcan paintings were humanly generous but broad in conception, too easy to take. George Bellows’s 1924 painting of Dempsey knocking Firpo out of the ring was as pleasant in its way as the Raphael Soyer paintings of meltingly lovable girls sitting around an employment agency. New York realists were more at home with sweating muscles than with the puzzle of existence. But I was glad that Henri, Glackens, Bellows, Luks, and Sloan were around—they gave color, the vibrant smack of life, to a New York that needed the recognition through art that writers and painters both withheld until the new century burst upon them.