

Sister Wendy's Wisdom

Dave Hickey, a columnist for *Art Issues* (Mar.–Apr. 1998), watched Robert Hughes's eight-episode documentary on American art, *American Visions*, and Sister Wendy Beckett's 10-part *Story of Painting*, both on PBS, and made a surprising discovery.

And what did I learn? Well, I learned that an English nun, who lives a fully contemplative existence under protection of a Carmelite monastery, is a more beguiling and reliable guide to the worldly practice of Western art than the dean of American art critics, simply because this cloistered sister accepts the fact that works of art are always compensatory objects made by fallible human beings for dubious reasons in an inadequate world—objects to be known as best we can know them and appreciated according to our own fallibility and desire. In other words, for Sister Wendy, works of art lack cultural transparency, and by maintaining this view, she goes a little way toward liberating the public perception of art from the prevailing cult of sociological legibility. . . .

This is Sister Wendy's advantage. She cares about art in her own odd way. Robert Hughes does too, of course, but he does not care about America, which turns out to be the real subject of his documentary. He knows about America, or thinks he does. He has an "American Vision." The cover of the book that accompanies his television series contends that American art can tell us something about the "American character." On screen, Hughes reverses these propositions and lectures us for four hours on the ways in which the "American character" tells us something about American art. The fact that Hughes's idea of the "American character"—deformed by Puritanism, beguiled by charismatic religion, and besotted by nature—describes no one of anyone's acquaintance does not deter him from using it as a template to select and blithely misconstrue those works that he finds suitably "characteristic" and to disqualify those works he finds "uncharacteristic" (which is to say, un-American).



Restorers or Vandals?

"Restoration Drama" by Daniel Zalewski, in *Lingua Franca* (Feb. 1998),
22 W. 38th St., New York, N.Y. 10018.

The cleaning of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes—a \$4.5 million, 14-year project completed in 1994—has been hailed by most Renaissance scholars as a revelation, notes Zalewski, a senior editor of *Lingua Franca*. Stripped of dirt, wax, and glue deposited over five centuries, the once somber-seeming frescoes now look "positively vivacious." Instead of the "sculptural" painter, more concerned with modeling of figures than with coloring, that he was long taken to be, Michelangelo now appears to these scholars as "a vanguard colorist" who boldly juxtaposed pure, flat pigments, in experiments that "laid the groundwork" for the Mannerists to come.

Nonsense, scoffs James Beck, a Columbia University art historian. He maintains, reports

Zalewski, that this "new Mannerist Michelangelo is less the product of careful cleaning than of the 20th-century imagination," that "the restorers inadvertently stripped a layer of shadows from the Sistine frescoes—a layer that Michelangelo himself had added in order to give his figures a chiaroscuro effect and unify and dampen the fresco tones."

Though Beck failed in his effort to halt the restoration of the Sistine Chapel, six years ago he founded ArtWatch International, a watchdog group that now has 600 members and chapters in New York, London, and Florence. The group's aim, Beck says, is to "stop foolish attempts to improve masterpieces with unnecessary, pseudoscientific cleanings."

There is no doubt that restorers have done

damage in the past. During the 1960s and '70s, a curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art told Zalewski, the Met applied a new synthetic varnish to several old-master works. "The idea," said the curator, who refused to identify the works involved, "was that the synthetic varnish wouldn't yellow because it lacked organic material. Well, it didn't. It turned gray. And we've since discovered . . . that removal is, if not impossible, extremely difficult."

Great advances in cleaning and conservation methods have been made in recent decades, Zalewski notes. "The techniques used today," asserts an adviser to London's National Gallery, "are as microsurgery is to the methods of the old barber-surgeons." Beck remains, to say the least, unconvinced. Museums, in his view, are inclined to make "invasive cleanings, using newfangled solvents," often on artworks that are "very well preserved." Some of the conservation work, he claims, amounts to "vandalism, even if well intentioned." Horrified by the recent

cleanings of Raphael's *Portrait of Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi* (1518–19) and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Beck and ArtWatch are currently trying to prevent the museum from restoring Verrocchio's *Baptism* (circa 1474–75).

"Cleaning controversies are nearly as old as museums," notes Zalewski. "The Louvre's policies were assailed on the day of its public opening, in 1793." Later, French painter Edgar Degas successfully fought the Paris museum's attempts to clean the *Mona Lisa*. Said Degas: "Pictures should not be restored. . . . Anybody who touches one should be deported."

Most restorations, Zalewski observes, "aren't salvage operations for crumbling canvases: Typically, the biggest problem with an old-master painting is dirt and a dulled varnish." In such cases, Beck's recommended solution is to live with the dirt, "because a hands-off policy is the safer route." But in the art world today, that is very much a minority view.

Free Salieri!

"Did Salieri Kill Mozart?" by Agnes Selby, in *Quadrant* (Jan.–Feb. 1998),
46 George St., Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia.

Popular history has not been kind to Antonio Salieri (1750–1825). A favorite of Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II and one of the leading composers of operas in late-18th-century Vienna, he is now remembered as the jealous musical mediocrity who poisoned Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91).

Leaving aside the question of music, the notion that Salieri murdered Mozart is a great injustice, according to Selby, a biographer of Mozart's wife, Constanze. It is the product of Viennese *Kaffeeklattsch* society gossip that was repeated in an 1823 newspaper story and then took wing with Pushkin's 1830 play *The Murderer Salieri* and a later opera. In the 20th century, playwright Peter Shaffer revived the Salieri-as-poisoner theme, and *Amadeus*, the 1984 film made from his play, gave it worldwide currency.

Salieri himself emphatically denied the 1823 story. In fact, Selby writes, he was "puzzled by the accusation. He had resigned from the Viennese Opera in 1790, well before Mozart's death during the following year. What would he have gained by Mozart's death? At the time Salieri's fame as an opera composer was far more widely spread than Mozart's, who was

not even appointed to the position Salieri had vacated at the Viennese Opera."

When the little-known Mozart arrived in Vienna in 1781, Salieri was already touring Europe, conducting one of his own operas at the opening of La Scala in Milan. He returned with the applause of the whole continent ringing in his ears. He had been a favorite of the emperor almost from the day he arrived in Vienna as a teenager recognized for his immense talent. Salieri's place was secure. But as Mozart's star rose—he was named court composer in 1787—so did the level of gossip about the "German outsider," and Salieri has been seen as a source. Some writers have claimed, for example, that he opposed the premiere of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* in 1786.

Nonsense, says Selby. Salieri actually revived *Figaro* in 1789 and frequently conducted Mozart compositions. Although not friends, the two men had a cordial relationship, Selby says. In 1789, Salieri was Mozart's guest at a performance of *The Magic Flute*, and a flattered Mozart reported to his wife that "Salieri listened and watched most attentively and there was not a single number that did not call forth from him a 'bravo' or 'bello.'" In 1822, a visiting journal-