

ARTS & LETTERS



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Engraver Lucas Vorsterman achieved the best rendering of the qualities in Rubens's paintings. In the *Descent from the Cross*, at left, he used a variety of graphic techniques to reflect the differing textures of skin, wood, cloth, hair, metal, paper, and sky.

well as his pioneering use of copper's reproductive possibilities.

Before Rubens, prints of paintings were simply graphic "translations" dominated by strong lines. Rubens, however, encouraged engravers to improve on traditional techniques. Most successful was Lucas Vorsterman (1595–1675), who used fine hatchings, cross-hatchings, and other subtle strokes, to suggest the texture of Rubens's colors, fabrics, and skin tones (as in *The Descent from the Cross*, above).

Rubens attached great importance to reproductions of his paintings. Prints made his work known to a wider audience, creating greater demand and higher prices. He apparently advanced his public relations in other ways as well—by printing portraits of influential officials and by distributing the prints of religious themes that make up the greatest part of his graphic production.

The Death of Moral Art

"Death by Art: or, 'Some Men Kill You with a Six-Gun, Some Men with a Pen'" by John Gardner, in *Critical Inquiry* (vol. 3, no. 4), University of Chicago Press, 5806 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

True moral artists must not only celebrate social justice and mirror their age; they must, as Tolstoy wrote, "sacrifice themselves in the service of man." Art instructs—or at least it ought to—but what passes for art today, claims novelist John Gardner, is the "cornball morality" of pornography and television, combined with cynical attacks on honesty, fidelity, patriotism, and courage.

It was not always so, Gardner writes. Dante, for example, at a time of

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deep spiritual despair, searched his history and found in Beatrice a vision of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. His *Divine Comedy* is an allegory of his search and an affirmation of the path he found. By contrast, Sartre, immersed in his celebrated "nausea," found life meaningless and made meaninglessness his standard. Were Dante writing today, Gardner suggests, he would be considered "freakish." Modern culture lionizes the artist for his angst, not his wisdom.

Contemporary novelists do little more than toy with moral standards, and when a Norman Mailer calls a Charles Manson "intellectually courageous," the line between morality and escapist fiction begins to blur. "The brave pursuit of truth," says Gardner, "changes utterly when truth becomes a matter of whim." He finds E. L. Doctorow "meretricious" because the writer avoids involvement in his characters' lives; Donald Barthelme may be an important and serious artist, but from his satire of despair no truths emerge. The doubting or sentimental artist who cannot offer positive models of virtue is a second-rate moralist.

Fiction should inspire but it should not lie. Moral art must speak of what is universal. And moral criticism, Gardner concludes, must be "a spur toward nobler action."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Black Tongue and the Pellagra Puzzle

"Black Tongue and Black Men: Pellagra and Slavery in the Antebellum South" by Kenneth F. and Virginia H. Kiple, in *Journal of Southern History* (Aug. 1977), Tulane University, New Orleans, La. 70018.

Pellagra, a malady caused by niacin deficiency, reached epidemic proportions among blacks and poor whites in the American South at the turn of the century. Though now nearly extinct, pellagra continues to puzzle scientists. Why did it appear so suddenly, and why had it not infected the pre-Civil War slave population? (The slave "hog-and-hominy" diet was almost perfectly pellagra-producing.) In fact, according to the authors, ante-bellum blacks did *not* escape the disease; its "protean" symptoms simply baffled 19th-century doctors.

First observed in 18th century Europe, pellagra usually strikes heavy consumers of Indian corn, which yields insufficient quantities of tryptophan, a niacin-producing amino acid. The staples of modern diets—milk, vegetables, and beef—all contain sufficient tryptophan, but these were not the staples of the slave diet. Most blacks are lactose intolerant (70–77 percent of U.S. blacks are unable to metabolize milk, compared to 5–19 percent of whites). Moreover, on Southern plantations, many vegetables were disdained as "fodder," and beef was rarely used be-