

The Dadaists were not the first to show that the theorists were wrong about art. A few decades before them, Roger Fry and other formalist painters and critics demonstrated that a painting need not be a representation of something beautiful or meaningful to be itself beautiful or meaningful. Art asserts the “paramount importance of design, which necessarily places the imitative side of art in a secondary place,” Fry announced. People should evaluate the form, not the content, of the work. The pop art movement of the 1960s discarded yet other necessities, such as the originality, “excellence,” and heroism typical of 1950s abstract expressionism. It replaced those traits with parody of mass culture, primitivism, and photorealism.

In a last-ditch effort to explain how people can appreciate, and esteem as art, grisly paintings such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), some theo-

rists have argued that at times the beauty is hidden and can’t be seen without adequate training. That’s sometimes true, Danto allows, but sometimes there’s simply no beauty to be found.

Danto, a friend of much that is new in the art world, is known for his austere formula that “x is an artwork if it embodies a meaning.” Anything goes.

Yet he believes that the 20th-century backlash against beauty may have gone too far. Some in the avant-garde now see beauty as *antithetical* to art—even the scandalous photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe seem in some eyes “too beautiful to qualify for critical endorsement.” Beauty, Danto concludes, “is one mode among many through which thoughts are presented in art to human sensibility”—one that deserves to be readmitted to the realm of art.

## Looking Downward

“Bellamy’s Chicopee: A Laboratory for Utopia?” by John Robert Mullin, in *Journal of Urban History* (Jan. 2003), Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

It may strike some as strange that Edward Bellamy’s 1888 utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, was the second-best-selling novel of 19th-century America (after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). After all, its idealized vision of Boston in the year 2000, with citizens organized into a compulsory industrial army and living a blissfully regimented life, would seem an unlikely candidate to capture the hearts and minds of Bellamy’s putatively individualist American readers. No less strange is that the novel was the work of a quiet, polite sometime-newspaperman and former lawyer who had spent most of his life in Chicopee, Massachusetts.

His experience in Chicopee, most critics agree, was central to Bellamy’s vision of the future. But according to Mullin, a professor of urban planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, it wasn’t the town they think it was. Bellamy (1850–98) said he saw his boyhood hometown transformed from a New England village where “everyone who was willing to work was sure of a fair living” into something very different. But that can’t be true, Mullin says. Following the mill town model that had transformed Waltham,

Lowell, and Holyoke, the Boston Associates company began to build an array of vast textile mills along the Chicopee River in 1822, nearly 30 years before Bellamy was born. By 1885, when he began working on his famous novel, Chicopee had become the sixth largest town in Massachusetts.

Bellamy wrote *Looking Backward* in his 15-room Greek Revival house on a hilltop overlooking the mills. “His involvement with local citizens was, at best, minimal,” writes Mullin. He seemed to live the quiet life of a country squire. (Yet in Boston, which he visited frequently, his debates and discussions were “renowned.”) The son of a Baptist minister whose downtown landholdings yielded a comfortable income, Bellamy had had a short-lived career as a lawyer, and then as a reporter for *The New York Evening Post*. He returned to Chicopee by the time he was 22, worked for a local newspaper, and eventually cofounded the local *Daily News*.

Bellamy’s hilltop perch put him in the perfect position to “be a dispassionate reporter and observer of the community,” Mullin says. What he saw was social upheaval—the spread of wretched tene-

ments, outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, and other diseases, and shocking examples of intemperance by the immigrant population. Those who were without work lived in hovels, barely staving off starvation. The 1870s saw a steady series of “strikes, booms, panics, recoveries, and depressions.”

Yet Bellamy also found himself fascinated both by the awesome extent of the mill complex, with its rationally designed streets and production processes, and by the military-like discipline of the workers as they changed shifts, walking to and from their nearby homes “in virtual lock step.” It is here, speculates Mullin, that “one can see the precursor

of his concept of an industrial army.”

Bellamy was not alone in trying to predict what would emerge from America’s industrial turmoil; the same period saw other utopian works from Mark Twain, Ignatius Donnelly, and William Dean Howells. But Bellamy’s vision captured the nation’s imagination like no other. This quiet man living on a Massachusetts hilltop was widely seen as a prophet—his ideas helped inspire the Populist Party, whose candidate won more than a million votes in the 1892 presidential election. Bellamy, however, would not live to see the new century. Tuberculosis claimed him at his Chicopee home in 1898.

## OTHER NATIONS

### *The Shanghai Illusion*

“Asia Minor” by Joshua Kurlantzick, in *The New Republic* (Dec. 16, 2002),  
1331 H St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

“China’s economic development is just mind-boggling,” says an enthusiastic Chinese-American executive based in Beijing, and many other foreign businesspeople agree. So do publications such as *BusinessWeek* and *Forbes*. But Kurlantzick, *The New Republic*’s foreign editor, says the emperor has no clothes.

“The country’s growth rates are vastly overstated, the result of cooked books and massive deficit spending,” he writes. “Companies selling to the Chinese market—foreign and domestic alike—are struggling just to break even. The economy is plagued by persistent deflation and a useless banking system.”

Yes, China has made some impressive strides since 1978, when it began to open its economy to the outside world. Shanghai, then a drab metropolis of Mao-suited servants of the state, is now “a vibrant city boasting dozens of European fashion outlets.” The Chinese middle class—less than 10 percent of the country’s population—has experienced a sharp rise in affluence.

But Shanghai and other flourishing coastal cities are the glittering exceptions. The government claims that the overall economy has grown by seven to 10 percent a year for the past two decades. But except for the “economic bright spot” of exports, Kurlantzick says, “the government’s numbers do not add up.” The offi-

cial, Soviet-style statistics are gathered from provincial data, and local officials are under intense pressure to meet targeted goals. In 2001 alone, the government itself said there were more than 60,000 reported falsifications.

Over the past five years of supposedly break-neck growth, points out economist Thomas Rawski of the University of Pittsburgh, China has experienced deflation, rising unemployment, and declining energy use. He calculates that the actual annual rate of economic growth between 1998 and 2001 was only four percent—not enough, with millions of peasants leaving the farm, to keep the rural jobless rate from exceeding 15 percent, according to several Chinese economists.

Foreign companies that use China as a place to manufacture and export goods are doing well, but Joe Studwell, editor of the *China Economic Quarterly*, and other leading specialists figure that less than 10 percent of the foreign companies that sell to Chinese markets are making profits. “Major Chinese companies often are doing even worse,” according to Kurlantzick. Smaller domestic firms can’t get loans because “China’s indebted banking system remains focused on propping up state-owned enterprises backed by the Communist Party.” As its recent five-year fall from 21st to 31st on the World Competitiveness Scoreboard