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“Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition”: Constant Disruption and Disturbing Continuities when Considering Heritage

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Abstract

Heritage is always dissonant. Earlier values are expressed in the artifacts we have inherited, which can later be rejected by failing to reflect our own values. Thus, history and its artistic representation are constantly revised and rethought. Some works, like Victor Arnautoff’s 1936 mural Life of George Washington, were created in a sense of critical dissonance, but are condemned today for other reasons: our own sense of dissonance.

Yet, while we sit in judgment over such works, we also bemoan earlier losses due to previous dissonant reactions. Religious, economic and political situations, or simply changes of taste, have led to great artistic and cultural loss. Mediaeval castles and churches have given way to later edifices; interior decoration hardly lasts beyond a few decades. The waves of iconoclasm, the eighth-century iconoclasts, the sixteenth-century Protestant iconophobes in England, or the Taliban today have destroyed entire histories of artistic achievement. We invariably condemn such acts as barbaric.

The past is therefore extremely fragile as it is prone to erasure and reconfiguration to accord with contemporary taste. Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition, but many people react with hostility to a past that does not reflect their specific situations. Tensions between personal creativity, social acceptance and historical reevaluation continually complicate our understanding of artistic heritage.

Introduction

The past is always construed in the light of contemporary understanding, which invariably differs from one era to the next. This can lead to anything from simple misreading to gross manipulation. At one end, we can misinterpret mediaeval art simply by applying modern concepts of colour to earlier works, while forgetting that such ideas as primary versus secondary colours are meaningless in explaining a twelfth-century manuscript illumination or even a fifteenth-century painting. At the other end, applying nationalist concepts to the study of ancient Gaul or Carolingian France (as if both were inevitable steps to the creation of the modern French Republic) is to completely misrepresent the political, social and economic dynamics of those previous eras. It falls to the historian to “set the record straight,” to coin a phrase. The problem therefore is not so much that history changes, as past events cannot be truly altered; what changes is the information we have about those past events, and how those events affect our understanding (historians themselves play a role in those variations). It is not so much the past itself as it is the *heritage* from the past that changes and that needs constant reinterpretation.

The term *heritage* denotes that which we have received from previous generations, be it physical objects or abstract information. The trove is then sifted to extract what is deemed of use, interest or value, discarding what is considered worthless (or worse), and adding new inventions and discoveries. The new package is then sent on to the next generation. Thus, the trove continuously evolves according to each generation’s needs and interests. History and its artistic representation are constantly revised and rethought as the works of previous generations express values which conflict with those of current times.

The evidence of such constant conflict points to the social nature of artistic practices. With that social nature come the dynamics of power involved in all social interaction. That dynamic is the basis of politics. The conversation between art and politics is often framed as a conversation about subject matter, thus, essentially, about how society is depicted. As such it is seen as a binary conversation between artists and authority. This of course excludes other participants in artistic debate, including the patrons and the intended audiences. Moreover, the very recourse to plurals underscores that these categories can be diverse and populated. Even artists, for most of history, never worked alone in the execution of their work. Finally, these relationships can evolve over time. Michael Baxandall sums up the evolution of the relationship between artist and patrons by stating that

the one general point to be insisted on is that in the fifteenth century painting was still too important to be left to the painters. The picture trade was quite a different thing from that in our late romantic condition, in which painters paint what they think best and then look round for a buyer. We buy pictures ready-made now; this need not be a matter of our having more respect for the artist’s individual talent than fifteenth century people like Giovanni Ruccelai did, so much as of our living in a different sort of commercial society. The pattern of picture trade tends to assimilate itself to that of more substantial manufactures: post-romantic is also post-Industrial revolution, and most of us now buy our furniture ready-made too. (1988, 3).

It must be added that a few lines earlier, Baxandall had pointed to that other group, the intended audience, which was essentially perceived as Ruccelai the patron’s audience, rather than the specific artists’ audience. Artists could command considerable sums according to the level of their skill they remained, in one way or another, on their patrons’ payroll. This must influence our understanding of the main issue, when the conversation between art and politics is framed as a debate between those who arrogate expression and those who arrogate authority. But the question

that remains is one of contemporary understanding even as these parties change with time and circumstances.

What is also essential when considering heritage is the fact that is grounded in the past. Time measures the change of circumstances. Heritage is always dissonant: it is the distance between past conceptions and present perceptions. The contemplation of heritage is the work of the historian, and, as Daniel Arasse explains,

the historian has always been anachronistic towards his object. . . . An artist or a philosopher has that right, it may even be their duty to extract the object out of the past, out of its time, to make it live according to today's questions. The historian however, has the strange obligation, rather stimulating intellectually, to claim an attempt at avoiding what constitutes his relation to the object. (2004, 219, my translation).

While studying the past, be it cultural, social or political, we must constantly remind ourselves that we do not perceive objects and events as they had been perceived previously. In 1500, the term *Gothic* as a term describing an architectural did not exist in France. At the time, what we would designate as *gothic* today was considered the “modern style,” as opposed to the “ancient style,” or more precisely the *à l'antique* style that had come from Italy, inspired by the rediscovery of the ancient Roman forms of architecture and design. These designs began to attract attention in France, where both were equally appreciated. Artists and patrons were quite aware of the possibilities of both styles. “The same artists and workshops,” notes Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, “could practice these different styles in succession and more importantly, at the same time.” (2010, 37, my translation) Choice of style was a matter of context or even subject matter, but there was no preference. The term *gothic* would appear later and gain its pejorative connotation in the early seventeenth century, before becoming adopted in the nineteenth century to designate the late mediaeval artistic style (Mignon 2019).

Heritage, finally, is not simply the history of art, but the practice of giving form to the past. The essential problem is that expectations of and about the contemporary audience will not to be found in later audiences, as attitudes, opinions and expectations change overtime. Past artifacts can be redesigned to serve a novel use. The Pantheon in Rome was easily repurposed from a pagan temple to a Christian church. Its very grandeur insured its subsequent survival. Many museums such as the Louvre in Paris or the Uffizi in Florence are housed in old palaces or other buildings. Dissonance of heritage lies in the way perceptions of the past can be refocused to accommodate prevalent ideologies.

As a recent nation, the United States of America has a clearly described history, spanning approximately three centuries. That history, however, has already forged a number of historic heroes and situations. The construction of the nation pivots on two key events: the War of Independence (1775-1783) and the Civil War (1861-1865). A central character becomes none other than George Washington, who served in the French wars and, as the first president, has been dubbed the *Father of the Nation*. The significance of both these events and characters, however, has been far from simple: their meaning and importance have been redefined several times over the years. *Dissonance* is not a novel problem.

The issues that led the several states to take arms against one another, as well as the expansionism that followed that conflict would eventually generate other forms of dissonance which would affect even Washington's significance. The first president's image has raised a recent storm of controversy around the monumental mural painted during the Great Depression for a public High School in San Francisco (fig. 2 - 3). Images in the mural have been considered unsettling, and calls for the mural's removal are regularly brought forth. In light of these conflicts

in both the collective and individual response to the past we might begin to appreciate the dynamic tensions that feed the network of ideas and practices that we call *a culture*. What are the dynamics behind such a desire to destroy a work which is itself a serious reexamination of national mythology?

1. The Continuity of Dissonance

How we retain history follows a pattern of remembering and repurposing historical events and characters. The idea that history exists to teach us lessons is as old as history itself. The question then becomes what are the lessons we wish to retain? The problem becomes even more difficult when we realise that the reality of history can be unwieldy and often refuses to follow a pattern of exemplary stances. Even seemingly simple events become increasingly complex under scrutiny. The significance of the two pivotal moments in US history changes over time and space. Both wars in America have alternative names: the War of Independence can be referred to as the American Revolution; the Civil War as the War Between the States.¹ A shift in name becomes a shift in focus. For many historians, there is more at stake during the War of Independence than a mere severance of colonial ties with the British Crown. Independence led people to reconsider the relationship binding a government and the people.² The bicentennial of the United States was celebrated in 1976 (the year of the Declaration of Independence), rather than 1983 (the end of the War of Independence) or 1989 (the signing of the Constitution).

Because of its symbolic significance, David McCullough (2005) explores the events of the year in his book *1776*, where he confronts the conflict with Great Britain on the one hand and the political shift instigated by the Declaration of Independence on the other, with the two matters continuously at odds. McCullough's book closes with the end of 1776. But the conflict with England would end in 1783, seven years later. And the political constructs that would flow from the Declaration of Independence could hardly have been imagined. It is the very sense of uncertainty that he chooses to instil. Just as in the year 1776, the outcome of the war was very much in doubt, the American Revolution left vital points unresolved. What would be the nature of the new nation? How is it to be organised?

The irony was probably not lost on Lincoln when, in the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, he stated during his famed *Gettysburg Address* that a new nation was founded "four score, seven years ago" (i.e., in 1776), for, as he explained, "[n]ow we are engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." (1863) Lincoln framed the current conflict as the final chapter of the founding of the nation. By the end of the century, that foundational vision was itself carefully reframed. The Civil War may have ended the conflicting issues that had lingered after the founding of the nation, but was it truly a satisfactory resolution, or rather one imposed by the winning side? By the end of the century, intellectuals and artists from the Southern states in the Union developed the vision of the Lost Cause. That some causes *should* be lost is beside the point: the War between the States ended the

¹ The political complexity of the American Civil War is illustrated by the fact that the French give it yet a third name, *La Guerre de Sécession*, or the *War of Secession*, which is technically an accurate description of the nature of the conflict, but which glosses over the majority of the political and social problems that the war addressed, such as the relationship between the states and the central federal government, or the practice of slavery.

² Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that the very concept of the nation-state is in fact an invention of the rebellious colonies in the New World; see in particular Chapter 4, "Creole Pioneers."

traditional Southern way of life. The most striking examples of this revision are depicted in two films: D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1916 and David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* in 1939.³ Of these two films, the first one is the most overtly political as it chronicles the destruction of the Southern way of life, which, in Griffith's view, was partly brought about by introducing a sense of false equality between races, and most notably, the possibility of miscegenation, which was his great fear. In an earlier western, a group of settlers are attacked by marauding Indians, and one character holds a gun to the heroine's head to avoid her capture and ravishment.⁴ To explore Griffith today is to explore the turn of the century's profound cultural fear of miscegenation: the thought of a white woman being taken by savages to produce half-breed children was intolerable. In *Birth of a Nation*, the director constantly tells the audience that the real villains in the film are "the mulattoes." It is, as Pierre Cormary points out, "the spectre of the stain that so agitates Griffith."⁵ (Cormary, 2007) The ultimate solution to such a fear, Cormary argues, is a symbolic form of incest: while the same family cannot intermarry, the same caste can, thus keeping in abeyance all impurities. Griffith's derogatory term, as extended throughout the film's thematic, only fanned the era's racism. But even for that era, the film's racism, to Griffith's astonishment one might add, was inflammatory. *Birth of a Nation* upon its release triggered protests by the NAACP at one end and revivals of the Ku Klux Klan at the other.⁶ Yet Griffith attempted to bridge the impossible gap between Lincoln's concept and the Southern concept. For Griffith, Lincoln remains *the* Great President;⁷ it was his death that allowed for the carpetbaggers and the relentless destruction of Southern culture. By 1939, the idea that the South was morally superior was a foregone conclusion. The "apolitical" nature of Selznick's project underscores the

³ For film historians, these two films are polar opposites. Griffith produced, directed, and wrote his *magnum opus*, going so far as to create his own company to manage the production. Selznick was the producer of his film, but his own company was unable to handle such a production, and MGM co-produced the project, which went through countless writers (including Ben Hecht and Jo Swerling) and at least five directors (including George Cukor and Sam Wood); Bauer, 2017; Pfeiffer, 2010.

⁴ When dealing with movies, especially very early movies as well as classic Hollywood, the expression "cowboys and indians" is the expression of choice, especially in the films depicting conflicts, such as the case here. The character Kicking Bird (Graham Greene) in Kevin Costner's 1990 film *Dances with Wolves* is a Lakota-Sioux. The hoard of savages attacking the stagecoach in John Ford's 1939 film *Stagecoach* can only be called Indians: they are a fiction that has no social, cultural or political reality other than their depiction in the film. In this context, as in the Griffith short, to speak of "marauding Native-Americans" is *preposterous*, that is to say it puts what comes afterwards before. More than a mere philological quandary, this creates a network of psychological, temporal and historical disjuncts that undermine the entire conversation – the very essence of dissonance. It should be added, however that much of John Ford's later career would be spent nuancing that initial simplistic and derogatory depiction of Native-American cultures. The most haunting of these being *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) which recalls the "Trail of Tears", or the forced resettlement in the southwestern deserts of a number of indigenous nations during the nineteenth century.

⁵ "*Car c'est bien un fantasme de souillure qui agite Griffith.*" Pierre Cormary calls Griffith "cinema's original sin," in a that post explores the disquieting tensions between the film maker's obvious cinematic brilliance and his equally disconcerting political views. The most disturbing aspect being that these very tensions, such as the use of black and white as symbolic realities as well as cinematic fact, are what give the film its aesthetic thrust. This demands every audience's cautious reading as they watch his films

⁶ The film also allowed for the arrival of Black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, as well as an entire field of "colored films", or films that gave voice to the Black community with black actors and subjects that concerned the community directly. See the Academy of Motion Pictures Museum exhibit in Los Angeles and its 2022 exhibition *Regeneration*.

⁷ This is not quite so true for the Southern States as a whole. Lincoln had confirmed emancipation, as the concurrent constitutional amendment was passed by the Republican Party. For over a century, the Southern establishment refused to vote for Republicans, who maintained their progressive policies until the end of Theodore Roosevelt's administration. "Southern Democrats" greatly weakened the party's progressive evolution. The Black population was explicitly barred from most New Deal benefits to ensure the southern vote.

success of Southern reframing. Indeed, between those two films stands Buster Keaton's 1925 *The General*, which inverts the perspective of an original pro-Union narrative, which as Keaton instinctively knew, would not have been accepted by audiences in 1925 (Ivens, 2021).⁸ Chivalry and courage could only be the province of the glorious South, so the train conductor with pluck and determination had to be a Southerner.



Figure 1: Emmanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 378,5 x 647,7 cm. New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, N°97.34. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is perhaps the most famously iconic painting of George Washington. Leutze applied the strategies of history painting to depict an event of the War of Independence – the unexpected attack against the British forces at Trenton in December 1776. He thus imbues the subject with all the moral values of epic exemplarity.

⁸ Such a rejection would not have been limited to the South: the United States was a segregated country. The practice included such national institutions as Major League Baseball (which had no teams south of Washington DC) and the United States Army. Both were integrated in 1947.



Figure 3: Victor Arnautoff, *Life of George Washington*, 1937. Fresco, one of sixteen panels spanning 178m² (the dimension of individual panels are not indicated). San Francisco, George Washington High School. Photo: Richard Evans, Creative Commons.

At the heart of the current controversy stands this image of armed men from the frontiers walking over the figure of a lifeless Native American. The image, however, is far more complex than this unsettling sight would suggest. For at the centre stands Washington indicating the way to America's Manifest Destiny.



Figure 2: Victor Arnautoff, *Life of George Washington*, 1937. Fresco, one of sixteen panels spanning 178m² (the dimension of individual panels are not indicated). San Francisco, George Washington High School. Photo: Richard Evans, Creative Commons.

In this major fresco, the artist chose to push the titular subject to the side and centre the image on the group of slaves, who, after all, were at the heart of Washington's fortune.

2. The Ironies of George Washington

The conflation of the War of Independence and the Civil War finds its focus in the person of George Washington. As David McCullough states, “[w]ithout Washington’s leadership and unrelenting perseverance, the revolution would almost certainly have failed” (2005, 294). This observation is most certainly true; yet, it is also incomplete in the characterisation of Washington. The iconography surrounding Washington takes on the resonance of classical history painting: exemplary illustrations of historical events. Washington’s exploits are given epic and foundational status: the overarching theme of these images presents Washington as the Father of the Nation. The most iconic painting was the German artist Emmanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (fig. 1); ironically, the original version of the work was destroyed by an Allied bombing raid in 1942 over Bremen, Germany (Hamon, 2014).⁹

This epic imagery tends to gloss over the fact that George Washington was a Southern gentleman, with a plantation in Mount Vernon, Virginia. As Arnautoff’s mural points out, Washington’s early military experience – and later political career - was gained during the French and Indian War (fig. 2), the New World spill-over of the Seven Years’ War in Europe.¹⁰ The very name of that war is telling in its terminology. The American theatre of war between France was fought with alliances forged with the Native tribes. France had the support of the Wabanaki Confederacy, whereas the English (and colonial forces) were backed by the Iroquois confederation. The “Indians” are something of an afterthought: any cursory glance in an encyclopaedia or dictionary present the reasons for the war and its objectives as always seen from a European point of view. The indigenous nations’ political agendas, their reasons for forging alliances with the colonial populations and, more importantly, for fighting one another, are never considered independently from the European conflict. The Wikipedia paragraph on the taxonomy of the war states that the colonials named the war after their opponents, without stopping to consider just how ominous such a designation is: it would shape American consciousness for the next two centuries. That there were native allies with the English or colonial forces had been conveniently forgotten: the opponents were the Indians, all Indians indiscriminately, and Washington’s earliest *faits d’armes*, his fame and glory as a warrior were based on the killing of those Indians, that indiscriminate mass of savages that needed to be exterminated for the civilizing of the American continent to begin. What is now rightly seen as a genocide has been depicted throughout most of American history as the epic taming of a wild continent. Washington is considered one of that epic’s first heroes.

The outdated, imprecise and even offensive quality of this description illustrates the violence of various spectators’ reactions to the murals today, but also the ambivalence the artist himself felt when dealing with the subject. In 1936, as a part of the New Deal Federal Arts Project, the muralist Victor Arnautoff received a commission to paint a fresco depicting George Washington’s life for the San Francisco High School that bore the first president’s name. At 1600 square-feet (148,6 m²), Arnautoff’s frescoes dominate the main hall of the high school. He greatly admired George Washington’s achievements, but remained highly disturbed by his military record and his fortune

⁹ Hamon points to several historical inaccuracies, however that is the domain of history painting, where the dramatic impact and emotional lessons are far more important than the historical accuracy.

¹⁰ Like many wars, its nomenclature changes along with its significance. But to link it with the Seven Years War is to give that war a global stature in history.

based on slave labor. Rather than expand on the epic, however, he chose to displace Washington and put ordinary people at the centre of the various episodes of Washington's life portrayed in the murals. These scenes are surprisingly accurate, especially when considering the artistic license used for such images as *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

"As I see it," wrote Arnautoff in 1935, "the artist is a critic of society" (Bogart, 2019). Arnautoff immersed himself in the life of Washington to create the murals. While recognizing the importance of the historical figure, he highlighted the class and racial underpinnings of the American project. The images challenged the heroism that had been ascribed to Washington. By the time he received the commission to paint the murals, Arnautoff had already created a number of artworks depicting working-class life and situations. He had left Russia as a White Russian fleeing the Revolution, but his life in America changed his views; by 1937, he was a member of the Communist Party. The *Washington* series continued to develop these themes which aimed to refocus American ideals.¹¹ As Richard Cherny (2019) argues, "Arnautoff was clearly using art to provide social criticism."

In his famous high school murals, Arnautoff chose to include a scene from Washington's life at Mount Vernon, in which the President's enslaved workers hold centre stage. This depiction is at the heart of a protracted controversy surrounding the murals starting in the 1960's (Kelly, 2019). Black students in the 1960's objected to the subservient vision of Black people in the murals (fig. 3) and went so far as to commission a new set of murals by the young artist Dewey Crumpler. Crumpler came to admire Arnautoff's works so much that he designed his own murals to serve as an extension and response to the originals.

Arnautoff's links to the New Deal and to the Communist Party meant that he inevitably would have been closely scrutinised by the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee. Over the last few years, however a new line of attack appeared as Arnautoff's work has been criticised not only for its depiction of Black people but also that of Native Americans. The figure of a lifeless American Indian being marched over by a group of spectral looking settlers (conspicuously painted in grisaille; NCAS, 2019) sparked much controversy. Two First Nation parents stated that their children had suffered from "generational trauma" at the sight of the image (fig. 2). "Adopting the hashtag #paintitdown," art historian Michelle Bogart (2019) notes, "the anti-mural groups insisted that the Board of Education accommodate its desire for a safe space by destroying them."

3. The Limits of Dissonance

The controversy surrounding the Arnautoff's murals underscores the question of reception and its evolution over time. Michelle Bogart's article notes how students in the 1960's demanded images of more proactively violent Black history, with, for instance, depictions of those who participated in the Revolutionary War. These student activists were not overly concerned about the depictions of violence: the lifeless Native American was never commented upon. The subsequent murals by Dewey Crumpler were commissioned by the Black Panthers. However, the

¹¹ While half a century after the Red Scare it may seem paradoxical to think that Communists would defend American ideals, this view was actually prevalent in New Deal America. Sidney Buchmann, the scriptwriter for Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) was also a Communist.

continuous discussion between art and politics has always been centred on the question of what can be said and why. The issue at the core is who has the right to decide.¹²

Contemporary reactions to Arnautoff's murals prove that the expressive value of art is not limited to its own time. Later viewers of the work can criticise the images of Black people as slaves, but they may also encourage questions about our shared ancestry. One of the most controversial pictures in the series is the vast image with Washington on one side, White people (in colourful clothing) working on the other, and a powerful mass of enslaved Black workers in white clothing dominating the centre (with a secondary group working the fields in the background). Arnautoff's main ambition was to depict the work involved in building America. Historical narratives may glorify Washington, but it was the masses of anonymous workers who actually built the nation. That nation in turn was built on the dispossession of the indigenous nations, which is nothing to be proud of, as the phantom settlers appear to point out. These depictions clash surprisingly with the racist westerns of the times,¹³ and with the glorified South in *Gone with the Wind*.

Finally, the discussion must take into account those silent participants: the sitters. The anonymous characters in the murals are as historical as Washington himself, making the question doubly problematic. Can artists depict the plights of marginalised communities to which they do not belong with dignity and weight, or is that impossible? One High School parent, Amy Anderson of the Ahkaamaymowin group of Métis, thinks not. She felt that "*The Life of George Washington* automatically represented a colonialist perspective *because it was painted by a white man*; therefore, the frescoes validated white supremacy" (Bogart 2019). Such a consideration would preclude any history that is considered outside the existential purview of the historian or artist. It also denies basic empathy. Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980) would be immediately disqualified as Zinn himself was a well-educated scholar.

The problem of sitters, it would seem, can be circumvented only when they are invited to participate in the work. The consequences of such practice are explored in Frank Möller's article "Politics and Art" where he describes photographer JR's collaboration with sitters in defining their image. Such a project avoids the criticism of exploitation and subjugation inherent in representing the other. The question that is raised in a historically oriented work is "the relationship between memory and art and the political functions of artistic engagement with memory and identity" (Möller 2016, 27). What memory is being discussed, and more importantly *whose* memory is being discussed?

As a matter of heritage, that question becomes how is that memory shared, or – in the light of the backlash and demands for the murals' removal – whether that that memory should be shared at all? We should be wary of such a backlash.¹⁴ While we sit in judgment over such works, we also

¹² In a word, censorship (Morawski, 1972). The practice of censorship is not limited to those in power. Indeed, that most infamous document, the Hayes Code, was established by the Motion Picture Producers' Association in response to the demands of a specific "pressure group" known as the *Legion of Decency*. The Hayes office was never a government agency. The calls against the murals to #paintitdown are calls from another private pressure group. The accusation of censorship regularly appears in the articles and editorials about the mural controversy.

¹³ A display at the Academy of Motion Pictures Museum in Los Angeles notes how the impact of John Ford's 1939 film *Stagecoach* on the public perceptions of Native Americans was similar to the impact of public perception of Black People in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Ford's later filmography gradually erodes that initial impression, but the image of faceless, nationless and violent "Indians" remains a staple in Hollywood lore as it appears even in the Netflix 2018 production of the Coen Brothers' *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*.

¹⁴ In a room full of people, Amy Anderson's son – who has been said to lower his head when faced with the mural - decided not to join his mother when she voiced her concerns publicly (Markowitz 2019). Young Mr. Anderson's reaction can, of course, be read many ways.

bemoan earlier losses due to previous dissonant reactions. Religious, economic and political situations, or simply changes of taste, have led to great artistic and cultural loss.

4. The Fragility of the Past

Can we voluntarily decide to destroy past artifacts? We cannot erase past events, but is it ever acceptable to suppress their memory? The waves of iconoclasm, be they the eighth-century iconoclasts, the sixteenth-century Protestant iconophobes in England, or the Taliban today, have destroyed entire histories of artistic achievement. We invariably condemn such acts as barbaric. Works of art and symbolic artifacts have been destroyed throughout history. The condemnation is superficially balanced by the immediate symbolic value of the destroyed object. The general public does not mind the voluntary suppression of second-rate statues of Confederate generals; the symbolic weight of the destruction of the Nazi swastika at Nuremberg far outweighs any artistic or cultural validity it may have. Few are greatly dismayed when seeing the statue of a dictator being pulled down by an angry mob. Indeed, the very gesture marks the end of the regime.

But as time wears on, it is the loss that becomes regrettable. The wars of religion took a heavy toll on the arts. The original Bodleian library at Oxford was founded in the 1320's and was greatly expanded with the arrival in 1447 of Humphrey, the first Duke of bequest of nearly three hundred manuscripts; yet we know nothing of that collection today. In 1550, under the impetus of Richard Cox, the library was purged of all "superstitious" writing and images. The library was effectively emptied of its entire collection. The empty building became the Faculty of Medicine (Bodleian 3).

We have forgotten about that book purge as the library has since replenished its collection; yet we watch in dismay images of book burnings in Nazi Germany. During the Puritan Revolution under Cromwell in the 1640's number of wood carvings in Westminster were beheaded. Stalls which once housed statues of saints are now empty. In one night of January, 1794, a fanatic revolutionary took a sledgehammer and shattered all the religious imagery that was carved into the central door of Notre Dame in Dijon. What had been believed to be a forgotten and regrettable past occurrence suddenly came alive when we saw jihadists blow up the monumental statue of Buddha in 2001. The same fundamentalist thought would like to purge the manuscripts that are jealously guarded in Timbuktu.

That these practices – be they the destruction of artworks or the pressure on social practices and language – are subjected to political and social forces is largely overlooked. In George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, Henry Higgins understands the importance of "proper speech" to insure social advancement. Neither he nor the play's author clearly realise the political underpinnings of such an attitude. Shaw was an Irishman, but seemed oblivious of the fact that he spoke and wrote the conqueror's language. A culture is not considered "a culture" until seen from afar, in space or in time. An early example of the awareness of cultural diversity is Montesquieu with his famous question "How can one be Persian?" (Letter XXX). Montesquieu was, of course, less interested in exploring Persian culture than he was in satirising French mores. "The *Lettres Persannes*," notes Jacques Roger (1964, 14, my translation), "had its place in a solidly established French literary tradition which asked the insidious question: how can one be French?"

Even without wilful destruction, losses inevitably occur, primarily because when they occur, they are rarely seen as cultural losses. Most people who are sensitive to that change tend to express their feelings in nostalgic terms, and are often dismissed as crusty reactionaries hearkening back to "the good old days." Loss of culture is not noticed until it is missed. The most astonishing aspect

of culture is its ubiquitous invisibility. From the mundane to the sublime, artifacts and practices are taken for granted. Most students at George Washington High School tend to be somewhat apathetic when faced with the murals in the school; it is the parents who become upset (Markowitz 2019). We go through our daily routine: how we organise our workspace is work; how we speak, how we dress, how and when we eat or sleep, how we furnish and decorate our homes is our lifestyle. It simply is.

For the most part, change occurs incrementally. A drafty and militarily oriented high-mediaeval castle is slowly but surely restructured and redesigned to become a leisure palace. One can see the entire process at work walking through the Louvre, which has retained the foundations to the original dungeon protecting Paris from the west, the Renaissance wings, the additions and reconfigurations commissioned by Louis XIV¹⁵, the north wing in the Second Empire. Today, we have I.M Pei's modern-day pyramid at the entrance; there have been additions since then... We owe the continued presence of the Pantheon in Rome to its grandeur, but many churches, such as the Saint Denis Basilica to the north of Paris are built over previous iterations. The remains of these early versions can be visited today, but that is hardly the case for most other churches.

Techniques and practices are discarded with new inventions. Obsolescence leads to the abandonment of technology. "You know, at one time there must've been dozens of companies makin' buggy whips. And I'll bet the last company around was the one that made the best goddamn buggy whip you ever saw. Now how would you have liked to have been a stockholder in that company?" (Jewison 1991). This observation about the ultimate obsolescence of industrial pursuits such as the making of buggy whips can be made just as well for more intellectually oriented fields. As late as the 1950's, a *computer* designated a person who computed. Now it is a machine that multitasks. The same machine rendered stenography, shorthand and dictation obsolete, revolutionising the role of a secretary.

There is perhaps a need for a certain amount of loss. Old clothes need to be discarded. Libraries, like gardens, need to be weeded. Buildings need to be torn down. But this need to replace old architecture and styles with new ones becomes too systematically complete to be tolerated: for every case of historical removal, there is a destruction too many. An inevitable backlash ensues. The Dissolution of the monasteries carried out under Henry VIII and the subsequent destruction of the abbey buildings was essentially a matter of loot, "a salvage operation to extract maximum value for the King and its owners" (Harrison 2013, 32). The speed and violence of the Dissolution created such a sense of disquiet that people began to seek out and treasure what remained of the past. English antiquarianism was born, together with a sense of uncertainty when faced with Protestant ideology. Jeremy Paxman notes how it took John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, published in 1563, with its graphic images, to reestablish the credibility of the Protestant faith (1998, 81-91).

In France, the demolition of mediaeval architecture was slower, as it had begun in earnest only in the mid-eighteenth century, and continued into the following century. By 1830, the centre of the Benedictine order, the magnificent Cluny church and abbey was in the process of being dismantled (only a third of it remains standing today). Enough was enough: intellectuals and artists launched a campaign to stop the savagery. Victor Hugo published his article "Guerre aux Démolisseurs" in 1832, as a follow up to his novel, *Notre Dame de Paris*, to save what remained of mediaeval architecture. In 1834, writer Prosper Mérimée was named *Inspecteur des Monuments Historiques* and commissioned to inventory and inspect the monuments of France, a task which he continued for the rest of his career. The backlash against destroying the Halles in Paris saved the train station that today houses the Musée d'Orsay.

¹⁵ Louis the XIV surprisingly was quite a builder: he did not limit his building frenzy to Versailles.

The fragility of architecture stems from the fact that it is essentially viewed as *useful*. This can explain partly the disturbing persistence of practice that appear to be at odds both with the artists who created the works and with the contexts in which they were created. The concept of its cultural significance comes only when most of the exemplars of a particular style have disappeared. Even then, it should be noted that the interest in any architectural history begins with the contemporary era, and runs parallel to the evolution of industrialisation. The old buildings stand as testimony to the tremendous cost of progress. Ruins themselves were considered majestic, as evidenced for instance by the works of the painter Hubert Robert (1733-1808).

Conversely, architecture tends to escape political categorisation. The buildings in Forlì are considered fascist in design, as the city was Benito Mussolini's birthplace and became a showcase for the grandeur of fascist Italy. The architecture at Forlì reflects a greater aesthetic sense – the Art Deco movement - which has seen expression in other political and social contexts. Buildings like the Chrysler Tower in New York or the Trocadero in Paris are also grandiose examples of Art Deco architecture, but neither were built in nations that were ruled by overtly fascist regimes. The movement was quite prolific in apartments and industrial design. While we remain aware of the fascist origins of the city's expansion, its participation in an overarching aesthetic movement may have helped in its transition from being a fascist showpiece to the modern democratic city it is today. Tensions between personal creativity, social acceptance and historical reevaluation continually complicate our understanding of artistic heritage.

All artistic modes of expression extend beyond political boundaries. The exhilarating montage often associated with Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov evolved along similar lines in 1920's France, with films like Abel Gance's 1927 *Napoleon*. Mediaeval Eastern European icons influence early Italian painters such as Duccio.

5. The Inquisition

What Victor Arnautoff did with his murals was to make the viewer see racial violence through a glorification of George Washington and with this apparent contradiction make us feel it. The recurring aspect in both major movements against Arnautoff's work is the need to change the subject. The issue of a painting's subject is as slippery as the subject of a novel. It is however the first central issue that must be addressed when looking at a work. The Black Panthers wanted to represent more proactively emancipatory Black people during the Revolutionary War; the #paintydown movement wants to delete the vision of the genocide of the Native Americans. But neither group is willing to address the significance of Black or Native American representation *within the framework of the imagery of George Washington*, imagery which is placed at the heart of an educational institution. Images are not the face-value realities detractors would like to believe, but ideas in their own right that need interpretation and that can be subtly equivocal. The very program of Arnautoff's work is a call to enter the school and look beyond the images of the past that we have been given and beyond the knowledge that we possess.

Once set in the past, a work can be quietly mothballed in a museum, where it can become carefully decontextualised or recontextualised to the point of meaninglessness. More troublesome works can be quietly removed from the rooms, or even from city streets.¹⁶ Such a removal has political implications. It creates a sense of anachronism that should never be forgotten when

¹⁶ Although this also raises cultural questions of what and who should be commemorated, as statues of historical figures across the cities of America are being removed by public demand.

studying such works. Even without the protective confines of a museum, contemporary spectators can see artworks in ways and conditions that the original artist never expected, or for that matter even intended. Walk into a dark church in Italy or France and you see great paintings and frescoes shrouded in shadow. Drop a coin in a box and the work will be lit up. Daniel Arasse blithely remarks “The pleasure will be such that you’ll drop a second coin!” (2004, 257, my translation). “Overall,” he notes “I’d say that these works have moved closer to us.” That proximity creates problems as the detail tends to overwhelm the overall painting. Exploring details is indeed stimulating for people who see the world in colour with all its shades, nuances and hues. When one sees the world in absolute binary terms of good and bad, right and wrong, the subtleties, ironies and ambiguities that are inherent in details become unsettling. The reactions to secondary questions come to obliterate the overarching work. While we like to believe that art is an intensely personal statement, it is also in fact a series of collective constructs: even at its most personal, a work of art is nonetheless the expression of an artist to an audience within a given social framework. What is perceived therefore as an absolute, a work of art for the ages, is the product of a continuous conversation. The *George Washington* mural demonstrates how art is neither created nor received in a vacuum. Any work is made to fulfil a certain purpose. It is created under certain political, social and economic conditions. To have commissioned such a work from an artist like Victor Arnautoff with his artistic and political baggage is to expect that the work would be framed in a certain way. To propose such a work for a high school is also to expect it to be received in a certain way. The public nature, the glaring visibility, and the monumental scale of Arnautoff’s work make it all the more troublesome. This in itself is curious: most statues in public parks or squares, even by major artists such as Rodin or Carpeaux, are patently ignored by those who walk by them daily but then are rediscovered in museum rooms. Arnautoff’s murals, as large-scaled frescoes prominently displayed in enclosed public places, such as the University of Oregon library, the Palo-Alto Hospital or the entry hall to the George Washington High School, cannot be ignored. All these works have drawn fire for various reasons, both at the time of their creation and today. Calls for their destruction are regularly brought forth.

“Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,” as the 1970 Monty Python sketch reminds us, because nobody expects to take on the role of an inquisitor. The few who relish the task are invariably condemned as dangerous fanatics. The politics of Arnautoff’s works cannot be dismissed, nor should they be; moreover, to remove or hide a work such as the *Life of George Washington* would have the added advantage for some of papering over the unsavoury aspects of George Washington’s image. We would be left with the simplistic heroic image of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. One can only wonder at the forces behind such a destructive dissonant reaction. It is easy to forget that the inquisitor stance is constant. Novel creations are subjected to various forms of censorship, scholarly study can be censured, and the art of previous generations silently set aside. It is invariably what happens when we see only with our own preconceptions.

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