

# REVIEW

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**The Rape of the Masters, How Political Correctness Sabotages Art**, by Roger Kimball. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1994, 196 pp., \$29.95 hardbound.

*Sol Schindler*

Roger Kimball, managing editor of *The New Criterion* and an art critic in his own right, has a dedication to what used to be called high culture and a deep outrage at its perversion. This outrage is both embellished and strengthened by a deadly wit that does not hesitate to ridicule the absurdity of much of what passes for art criticism in today's world.

He begins by asking the basic question, why do we study and teach art history. There are many answers of course: to learn about the cultural setting in which art unfolds; and to familiarize ourselves with the enormous inheritance that has come down to us that delineates mankind's conjuring with the world. All this he describes as the ambient body of culture, while the "yeast" is supplied by a direct visual encounter with a great work of art. Everything else, the author maintains, is "prolegomenon or afterthought scaffolding to support the main event which is not so much learning about art as it is in experiencing it first hand."

Art history is still taught this way in many places, but the author laments that a new mode, that is as invidious as it is wide spread, has taken over. He points to the German critic, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), whose essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has become an influential text in art and literary studies. In it, Benjamin

wrote that "the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual it begins to be based on another practice—politics." Thus we have today's mantra that everything is political, with a consequent debasement of all aesthetic values. This belief leads logically into such statements as words have no meaning because everything depends on the speaker's (or writer's) political framework.

The author quotes Keith Moxey, the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Art History at Barnard College and Columbia University, who in his 1994 book, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, writes

All cultural practice is shaped by political considerations. . . . The Abandonment of an epistemological foundation for art history means that historical arguments will be evaluated according to how well they coincide with our political convictions and cultural attitudes.

In examining Hieronymous Bosch's famous triptych "The Garden of Earthly Delight" he argues that Bosch was deliberately obscure and writes

instead of valuing transparency, by which paintings are said to offer us access to an intellectual realm beyond the surface, I should like to emphasize opacity, their insistence that the interpreter create meaning before them.

This means, of course, that what the painter did or thought is of no consequence. The viewer will create meaning

based on his own political convictions and cultural attitudes, which unfortunately is true of how much of today's art history is written.

Kimball's comments on this verbiage are worth repeating in full so that the reader can get an idea not only of the substance of the author's refutation but the passion with which it is invoked.

If Professor Moxey is right, Bosch ensured himself a place in the cannon of great artists admired by the Burgundian aristocracy and the humanistically educated upper classes not by painting well but by a species of class-warfare game-playing. As an interpretation of Bosch it is, to speak plainly, bosh. But as a way of helping Professor Moxey ensure his own place as a "brilliant" "scholar" in a "great" contemporary university, the procedure obviously has much to recommend it.

There is something unutterably depressing about wading through this sort of academic gobbledegook. It's not just the rebarbative pseudo-thought, the clichéd political sloganeering, the minatory, all-knowing tone. That's bad enough. But the real tragedy of this readerproof verbiage is that it acts as a prophylactic, effectively sealing off students from any direct contact with works of art. Professor Moxey's aria about *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is only incidentally about the painting of that name. Its real subject is Professor Moxey's political obsessions—an absorbing topic to some, no doubt, but not particularly relevant to someone interested in Hieronymus Bosch.

Kimball believes that by subordinating art to a non-artistic agenda (everything is political) one drains art of its intrinsic dignity and pleasure, and basi-

cally denies it any religious or aesthetic import. Seen through the lens of political correctness, art or literature becomes indistinguishable from other modes of advancing one's political agenda. The question logically arises then, is the difference between a comic strip advocating women's rights and a novel by Jane Austen simply one of technical competence? He feels that by judging art by non-artistic standards, the postmodernist critic is in effect removing art from the significance it once had in people's lives. Such action has to be called anti-art.

The assault on art comes in two ways: Kimball describes one as a process of spurious aggrandizement in which the mediocre is celebrated as a work of genius. He cites as an example Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of the sadomasochistic demimonde, which drew such comments as the "exquisite triangulation of the bullwhip being reminiscent of the composition of certain classical nudes." He also refers to the London artists Gilbert and George who composed "The Naked Shit Pictures," huge photo-montages of themselves naked with bits of excrement floating about. One critic invoked the Isenheim altarpiece as a precedent, another wrote of "the artists' self-sacrifice for a higher cause which is purposely moral and indeed Christian." It is difficult to say which are less relevant to art, the works themselves or the remarks of the critics.

Kimball calls the other assault "the rape of the masters," from which he derives the title of his book. That assault

operates by attacking, diluting, or otherwise subverting greatness. Its enemy

is civilization and the social, moral, and aesthetic assumptions upon which civilization rests. Its aim is to transform art into an ally in the campaign of decivilization.

These are strong words but, as has been shown, the author is not timid in his use of language, and he is passionate in his defense of the fine arts.

After this opening jeremiad the author turns to seven generally acknowledged works of merit which he feels have been raped—analyzed to death and beyond—by current art critics, all of whom, instead of heightening the aesthetic appreciation of the work under examination, have wandered off into irrelevant and yawn-producing political agendas. In each instance, he attacks the offending critic head on. He chose only seven, feeling more would be tedious, but regrets that there were hundreds of other examples he could have chosen.

One of the paintings of Gustave Courbet, a French realist of the 1850s, is titled "The Quarry," and depicts a slain roebuck, a hunter in the shadow, a master of hounds blowing a hunting horn, and two playful dogs. Michael Fried, the J.A. Herbert Boone Professor of Humanities and director of the humanities institute at Johns Hopkins has supplied us with an explication that in his own words is

so extreme—what I see taking place in his paintings is pictorially and ontologically so remarkable—that it seems altogether unlikely that any nineteenth century critic, that indeed Courbet himself, could have understood the meaning of his enterprise developed in this book.

If the audience for whom the painter painted, and the painter himself, could

not have understood what the critic was saying, is it not the height of arrogance for the critic to be saying, "listen to me, I know far more than all of you?" What Professor Fried is talking about is post Freudian sex, of course. Courbet and his audience certainly knew about sex; they managed to reproduce themselves without any instruction, but they could not have been aware of the profundities Professor Fried has unearthed. The roebuck is hanging from a branch, his forelegs on the ground with head facing the viewer. His genitalia are therefore hidden from view, while neither the hunter nor the master of hounds is even facing the dead quarry.

Prof. Fried writes

My suggestion that *The Quarry* calls attention to the undepicted genitals . . . invites further discussion in terms of the Freudian problem of castration.

If one looks at the picture, one sees the hunter somnolent from fatigue, the master of hounds concerned with his hunting horn, the two dogs playing, none looking at the roebuck, but a castration problem exists because the deer's genitalia are not exposed. Courbet considered this painting a hunting scene, neither more nor less, but since he hadn't read Freud, what could he know? Mr. Kimball's dissection of Professor Fried's analysis is far more involved and makes the professor seem even more inept; however it hardly seems necessary to go on.

The Kimball surgery continues as he dissects the analysis of Mark Rothko's "Untitled" by Anna Chave, Sargent's "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit" by David M. Lubin, Reubens's "Drunken

Silenus” by Svetlana Alpers, Homer’s “The Gulf Stream” by Peter Ward and Albert Boime, Gauguin’s “Spirit of the Dead Watching” by Griselda Pollock, and Van Gogh’s “A Pair of Shoes” by Martin Heidegger. It is both instructive and pleasurable to see Kimball demolish the absurdities hatched upon these works by the writers named. But also with that pleasure comes a foreboding. What lies ahead for any student of art in this sea of nonsense?

In viewing the current scene, one is reminded of the late Senator Moynihan’s comment on defining deviancy downward. What was outlandish yesterday is commonplace today. The author feels that the absurdities that abound should

be clearly and energetically labeled as such. Laughter is an effective antiseptic to the rot that has infected the academic study of art and is also a useful inoculation against professorial intimidation, a common malpractice of the academic world.

Years ago in an interview in the *Paris Review*, Ernest Hemingway said every writer needs a built in *merde* detector. Roger Kimball agrees that if we remove the *merde*, the rot, the debris of critical insensitivity and self aggrandizement that lies between the viewer and the work of art, art can resume its proper place in the current of civilized life.

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*Sol Schindler writes from Bethesda, Maryland.*