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President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



Arts Mess Shows Need for Standards

Edmund Burke once wrote that society "cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without."

In a related statement Irving Babbitt commented early in this century that, when society routinely turns to political strife and litigation to settle its differences, it is a sure sign that that society is breaking down.

These statements are useful for the light they shed on current controversies in the U.S. art world. Three recent cases in point:

- the arrest of a "rap" group in a Florida county on charges that the lyrics to some of its songs violated obscenity laws.
- the lawsuit brought by surviving relatives against a "heavy metal" rock group alleging that Satanic material embedded in some of the band's recordings had prompted two youths to commit suicide.
- the continuing battle in Congress over the funding of obscene, indecent, or sacrilegious works by the National Endowment for the Arts.

A certain type of liberal will ritualistically decry all such instances of governmental intervention in artistic matters as unwarranted violations of the freedom of expression and as—how horrid the word sounds on liberal lips—"censorship."

The quote from Burke suggests, on the other hand, that, when artistic liberty becomes license, society has the right—indeed, the obligation—to impose some limits as a matter of self-preservation.

The government's responsibility for applying reasonable standards is all the more obvious when, as in the example of NEA grants, a limited group of artists receives taxpayer subsidies, while a much larger group is necessarily excluded from such funding. For responsible officials to do anything less would be to fail in their fiduciary duties as legislators and administrators.

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NHI Notes . . .

Dr. Russell Kirk, NHI treasurer and Academic Board chairman, has penned an essay summarizing the importance of British history and culture to the American way of life and denouncing those who want to scrap the traditional curriculum in favor of "multiculturalism." "What American education and American culture actually require is not some new curriculum of racial and class hatred," writes Kirk. "Rather, we urgently need a renewal of our patrimony of culture, that we may draw upon the wisdom of the species when confronted by our social and personal tribulations at the close of the twentieth century." A copy of Dr. Kirk's essay can be obtained by requesting Special Report #59 from the Public Policy Education Fund, Inc., 161 E. Pine Street, Grove City, PA 16127. . . . NHI Chairman **Clas G. Ryn** has maintained an active speaking schedule. In an address to the Tower Club, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., organization of business and civic leaders, Ryn discussed the important relationship between the decline of academic and cultural standards and the social problems afflicting contemporary American

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NHI's Ideas Are Having Widening Impact

NHI's publications and ideas are increasingly quoted and are having a widening impact. The most recent example is a new book *The Closing of the American Heart: What's Really Wrong with America's Schools*, which quotes heavily from two books published by the Institute—*Literature and the American College*, by Irving Babbitt, and *Educating for Virtue*, edited by Joseph Baldacchino—and the Institute's scholarly newsletter *Humanitas*.

The new book, by Ronald H. Nash, professor of philosophy and religion at Western Kentucky University, argues that the fundamental weakness in contemporary American education is its

tendency to cut "traditional moral and religious values from what our students learn"—a major departure from the classical notion of education which saw an intimate relationship between reason and ethical virtue.

The book (Probe Books, 235 pp., \$14.95) is written from an evangelical Protestant perspective but does not flinch from pointing to the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the Christian school movement and the evangelical colleges and universities. Among the weaknesses cited by Nash is a tendency of some institutions toward anti-intellectualism—toward being "long on spirituality but short on academics."

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Need for Standards

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But, though the public undoubtedly has an interest in the maintenance of certain minimum cultural and artistic standards, the police power and the courts are blunt instruments, not well suited for this purpose, and should be used only as a last resort.

As Babbitt suggests, when litigation becomes rampant and "there ought to be a law" is on everyone's lips, it is a sure sign that the barbarians are already within the gates and that civilization is in jeopardy.

That millions of Americans want Congress to compel the NEA to cease funding materials or performances that fall short of minimum standards of decency is understandable. But it would be better still if those Americans would demand that the NEA enforce an even higher standard—i.e., that only works that deserve to be called art will be funded.

What is art? According to the philosopher Benedetto Croce, it is the imaginative expression of experience. It must express the whole of life, *including its moral dimension*.

But it must not be "preachy" or didactic, in which case it sinks to mere propaganda; here Croce, perhaps the most influential aesthete of this century, reinforced the already formulated view of Irving Babbitt. Nor must art appeal primarily to non-aesthetic desires or prurient interest, in which case it may be a form of entertainment but certainly not art.

According to common usage in this

country today, however, art is pretty much whatever anyone wants to say it is. The only standard is that there are no standards. Anything goes.

How else explain that a woman can strip to her underpants, smear her body with chocolate frosting, parade around a stage bare-breasted while mouthing a few inanities about exploitation and excrement, collect a nice subsidy from the NEA, and be lionized by *Newsweek's* theater critic as a great "performance artist"?

Don't laugh. This really happened.

Sure, an aroused citizenry can cut off a few subsidies. And the woman just mentioned has been cut off—though, thanks to notoriety from the funding controversy and praise from publications like *Newsweek*, her career is going better than ever. Indeed, she's now a celebrity, hence the object of admiration from a society which is no longer capable of recognizing real excellence or distinguishing it from sheer decadence.

And, here or there, a backwoods judge may throw the book at some foul-mouthed rock group for breaking the obscenity laws. Once in a great while, a conviction might even stick.

But neither cops nor judges nor congressmen can win this battle. They're doomed to fighting a rearguard action as long as those who set the tone in the art and entertainment world—the writers, the critics, the entertainers, and the media—continue catering to the worst of human impulses and pronouncing them good.

For the current cultural decline to be arrested will require a widespread

reawakening to standards—artistic, intellectual, and moral. And that can only happen if the schools and academic institutions at all levels once again discover the close connection between art, ethics, and wisdom: that it is impossible to have any one of these without the others.

NHI is working to reawaken genuine artistic sensibility, which is the only way to head off the inevitable crackdown on artistic debauchery by an exasperated and even desperate society whose critics have utterly failed in their role as the nation's artistic conscience.

Institute News

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life. Ryn, whose book *Democracy and the Ethical Life* recently appeared in a new expanded edition, delivered lectures on democracy at the Inter-American Defense College and at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. . . . Dr. Ryn has also written a major introduction to a new edition of Irving Babbitt's classic work *Rousseau and Romanticism*, which will soon appear from Transaction Books. . . . A new edition of *The Quest for Community: Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom*, by NHI Academic Board member **Robert Nisbct**, has been released by the San Francisco-based Institute for Contemporary Studies Press. The book (272 pp., \$10.95) explains the harm to individual and society that results when the centralized state usurps the functions of religious, familial, and other traditionally independent groups, thereby emptying those institutions of real meaning.

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