

# NATIONAL HUMANITIES BULLETIN

Vol. II, No. 4

Fall 1991/Winter 1992

## President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



### The 'Gresham's Law' of Art

George Will, in a recent column, described the latest great controversy to shake the American art world: whether a three-hole privy seat from an old Long Island outhouse, soon to be auctioned as fine art, deserved that designation or whether it was merely an artifact, because one, or perhaps two, famous abstract artists had painted on it as a lark during a 1954 croquet party.

Will notes that "Millions of dollars may turn on the distinction. Or, more likely, dollars will make the distinction. If millions are bid, that will settle it: It's art." A toilet seat as high art? Actually, this sort of nonsense is commonplace.

Will provides other examples. An "Earth artist" stretches a curtain across a Colorado valley. A 'conceptualist' spends 16 days on the Trans-Siberian Railway placing a different slate beneath his feet each day, then burns his notes and smashes the ashes on the slates, which are then exhibited. A 'post-minimalist' artist exhibits a live pig in a cage. An aspiring artist — who needs to aspire? — receives college credit for spending a weekend in a gym locker and calls this 'a duration-confinement body-piece.' "

When the movement of which these "works" are the progeny began about a century ago, its purpose was to shock the middle class. But long ago, as Will observes, many artists, having more shrewdness than talent, stopped trying to shock the bourgeoisie and began milking it instead. For the vast majority of us who have better things to do with our money, it would be tempting to snicker momentarily at the would-be sophisticates who are taken in by this charade and then to be about our business.

It is certainly a commentary on the age-old folly of human nature: "The Emperor's New Clothes" repeated a thousand times a day right here in our own country and the supposed arbiters of taste, exemplified by the New York literary and artistic establishment,

See *GRESHAM'S LAW*, page 2

## NHI Notes . . .

In a paper on "Federalism and the Unwritten Constitution" delivered to a Los Angeles meeting of the Philadelphia Society, NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn** pointed to the dangers of abstract moralism and its incompatibility with the American constitutional framework. At the recent national meeting of the John Randolph Club Ryn lectured on "Responsible Nationhood," arguing against "both utopian globalism and national self-absorption." . . . Just out is a revised edition of NHI Treasurer and Academic Board Chairman **Russell Kirk's** *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (Sherwood Sugden, 315 Fifth St., Peru, IL 61354, 373 pp., \$12.95). Typical of the wisdom found in this volume's more than a score of essays is the following warning, so relevant to our smug age: "[W]hen every other motive to action is stifled by satiety, and when the world is crapulous with boredom, then the lust after power will be doubled and redoubled, even among men who otherwise would be content with obscurity; because only in the frantic rape of power will there then be relief from that depression which follows hard upon indulged sensuality."



### NHI Chairman Addresses Heritage Foundation

*A distinguished audience filled The Heritage Foundation's Lehrman Auditorium to hear NHI Chairman Claes G. Ryn (inset) discuss the surge of ideological utopianism, the subject of his book The New Jacobinism.*

A Quarterly Publication of the National Humanities Institute

214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E. □ Suite 470 □ Washington, D.C. 20002 □ (202) 544-3158

**'Gresham's Law'** / From page 1 helping to perpetrate the fraud. Yes, it is always tempting to laugh at our supposed betters when they are contemptible; and, if this were merely an instance of Barnum's famous maxim about the ubiquity of "suckers" being illustrated on a grander scale than even he envisioned, we could afford to feel both superior and complacent. Unfortunately, the damage resulting from the nihilism that passes for contemporary art is not confined to its willing co-conspirators. On the contrary, it pervades virtually every aspect of our culture. The effects are devastating, and none of us escapes unscathed.

The problem is the existence, as in economics, of what could be termed a "Gresham's Law of Art": Bad art, like bad (inflated) money, drives out good. Now, many believe — perhaps wishfully, given the present historical context — that art is merely a means of entertainment: something we do as a diversion from serious matters and nothing more. If this were so, the Gresham's Law of Art would be relatively harmless. But, whether we realize or wish to acknowledge it, the quality of a society's art—even more than its scholarship or its technology—is a measure of the degree to which life therein transcends the level of barbarism.

While there is a place for art as recreation, great art is something more. Human beings, however busy with their own pressing activities, have a deep-seated need to be part of a larger whole. Reason by itself cannot fill this need. Reason is indispensable to man, but for the individual to achieve wisdom, he

must grasp the universal element of his being. And for that to be possible, reason must be guided by imaginative insight.

What is the universal? Traditional Christianity refers to it as God. This higher reality cannot be described with exhaustive precision. It transcends man's finite experience. Irving Babbitt has described what is highest in human experience as an unchanging quality of will or power felt by man that "sits in judgment on the ordinary self and inhibits its impulses." By vetoing incipient actions that would be destructive of goodness (while permitting those that advance its purpose), this power orders man's life to a common center and gives it meaning and worth.

Human actions always take place in unique circumstances. In that sense all choices are particular. Yet to the extent that men's actions are inspired by the higher will, their lives partake of the universal and unchanging. Such men are drawn into community with all others so motivated—living, dead, and yet to be born—and their lives, despite inevitable tribulations, are marked by deep and lasting satisfaction.

**Art and the Universal**

The tug-of-war within the human breast between the higher or universal will, on the one hand, and man's lower will or self-indulgent self, on the other, is the core reality of human existence. Human happiness depends upon the outcome of this struggle.

The best literature and art will always express this reality in some manner — not in a didactic, formulaic, or ser-

monic way, but creatively, intensively, and concretely. If the kind of art that is dominant in society does not convey this central fact of human experience and help attune man to the universal, his desire to find meaning in life will take a perverse direction. The individual will seek an illusory and potentially dangerous "infinite"—one that is identified not with concentration and inner moral effort but with emotional drift and unrestraint.

Instead of elevating himself in accord with what lies above mere reason, man will sink to the level of the subrational and confuse the universal with the fulfillment of his dominant passion of the moment. Which passion is strongest will differ not only among individuals but within the same individual at different times.

When man's life is not ordered to an abiding purpose, the tendency will be toward dramatic shifts of direction and a lack of coherence, within both the individual and society. Also characteristic of a society dominated by bad art is the prevalence of self-deception and escapism. Power-seeking is identified as "a desire to serve," vulgar sensuality as "love," license as "liberty."

Much of modern art may be a scam, but it is at the same time symptomatic of a loss of true universality and of Western man's succumbing to idiosyncrasy, nihilism, and destruction. The remedy is not to scorn or reject art—a temptation to which many American conservatives are singularly prone. The remedy, on the contrary, is to cherish true art and restore it to its rightful place, in which capacity it might actually point the way out of our present miasma.

NATIONAL HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
 214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
 Suite 470  
 Washington, D.C. 20002

Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution to help NHI to conduct its program of education, research, and publishing in support of traditional Western values. (Contributors of \$30 or more will receive *Humanitas* and the *National Humanities Bulletin*.)

\_\_\_ \$1,000    \_\_\_ \$500    \_\_\_ \$250    \_\_\_ \$100    \_\_\_ \$60    \_\_\_ \$30    Other \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_  
 ZIP \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to the **National Humanities Institute**.