

## \*WEE\* ON THE DRY SIDE

John Hyde

### *Government and the Arts*

It is said, and I don't quarrel, that art reflects its times--though more a reflection of aspirations and fears than actuality. I am not sure the artist intended it, but De La Croix's 'Liberty Leading the People' (over the bodies of French dead) tells us more about the true nature of the French Revolution than a good history. Salvador Dali's distorted figures show us relativism---a world without absolute goals and morals. The works, though so different, are both exquisitely ugly; not everybody sees them that way.

Buildings with oppressive facades, like that of the Korean Parliament House, don't exude democracy. (Our own new parliament house, with its massive flag pole, emphasises too much authority.) Communism's architecture and its grandiose empty music accurately reflect a depressing lack of individuality---a society where flesh and blood cannot hide and dare not advertise itself. These tell us about the essence of things so I suppose they are 'art'. They are also unintentionally truthful, but clever art can lie.

From primitive times Governments have understood the influence of art or more generally of 'culture' and tried to use it for their own, often nefarious, ends. It can be turned against them---as was Picasso's 'Guernica' and Dylan's use of 'Where have all the Flowers Gone'. They therefore try to control it, by regulation and prohibition---as they did in inquisition Spain, several times in Islam, Nazi Germany and modern USSR---and by buying the allegiance of artists.

Because governments are more interested in 'social messages' than in evaluation and revelation, government art is designed to hide more than it reveals. Although the symbolism can hardly be misinterpreted, it is unconvincing. Non-totalitarian governments know this and mostly refrain from the sort of abominations erected in Moscow, Peking and Sukarno's Djakarta, but unfortunately not always. Perth's main thoroughfare, St George's Terrace, was far from Australia's least attractive; it has been spoiled by half a mile of poles carrying badly portrayed social messages which convince us of nothing save the crassness of those who put them there.

Whatever their medium, artists are by nature articulate, so political leaders fear them. To avert criticism they employ taxpayers money to appeal to artists' and art lovers' cupidity which is no less than that of other mortals. That these transfers are highly, perhaps singularly, regressive has not deterred either kings or socialists. The popular arts, such as rock band music, are not subsidised. Subsidies, which can be

quite massive for say a seat at the opera, are reserved for the unpopular arts.

Another reason that football-loving labourers are forced to subsidise arts they don't enjoy, is that civil servants and politicians see themselves as part of the educated elite, and not wishing to appear philistine, they allow themselves to be snowed by self-interested artists.

Some art, although it can have been seen, heard or read by few in its own time, has survived to please millions. By the usually useful criterion of welfare economics, aggregate utility, Michelangelo was worth subsidising. In my parliamentary days, on my way home from a taxpayer-subsidised visit to North America, I spent a quiet hour in the Cathedral at Florence, soaking up Michelangelo's third and unfinished Pieta and contemplating these questions:

Was it, like the Taj Mahal, taxed from the poor or were the Medicis' who supported Michelangelo just clever merchant bankers whose market transactions enriched Florence? The latter seems to have been more the case but I'll bet they enjoyed a few monopolies. In the context of paying for Michelangelo, did it matter? Taxes undoubtedly paid for the Palace at Versailles.

Would the world be a poorer place without the compulsory transfer of money to support artistic endeavour?

Can the production of a few exquisite and enduring works, which millions will ultimately enjoy, justify taxes that subsidise art generally, most of which will be second rate or less?

How do you measure long distant future benefits? The Sphinx contributes to Egypt's foreign exchange today, but no discount rate could be low enough to justify the taxes (probably paid in human life) that built it.

Could an accountable committee recognise and have faith in a Michelangelo labouring slowly upon a masterpiece, or is that faith possible only when it is one's own money at risk? Could the politically inept young Michelangelo have got a government grant? Did he need one?

John Harper-Nelson has long experience as an arts practitioner and administrator in both public and private sectors. As a WA Arts Council member he tried to ensure high standards and political independence but in the end despaired of that process. He came to believe that most taxpayer funding is bad for art itself. He writes, (AIPP: Critical Issues No.9) 'Funds for the arts are being used extravagantly, for a plethora of projects which have little public support or value, but disproportionate political support.'

He challenges the usual justifications for forcing impecunious taxpayers to subsidise art---civilisation, culture, national pride and tourism---but thinks governments will do it anyhow. If so, they should do it as efficiently as possible.

Government subsidies paid to one, say, author are *de facto* government censorship of another. There is no better

arbiter of taste than what someone will voluntarily pay for. Quality and independence can be achieved best by the greatest possible expression of market forces. Harper-Nelson asks us to at least consider vouchers, tax deductions and direct purchase of established artist's work for public viewing in lieu of direct subsidy.

Robert Conquest, poet, historian and translator of Solzhenitsyn, said that the enemy of art is not the Philistine but the Moabite, the trendy pseud and artist *manque* who corrupts the business of art from within.

Australia's Moabites live off bureaucracy as blowflies off dead meat.

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