

WEEK 18, 2020

THE EPOCH TIMES  
ARTS &  
CULTURE

JOHN BOYD TEXTILES LTD.



One of the world's last horsehair weavers, John Boyd Textiles Ltd. has woven horsehair fabric in Castle Cary, Somerset, in southwest England, since 1837.

One of the World's Last  
*Horsehair Weavers...4*

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### REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS

## ART APPRECIATION 101:

# Benefits and Pleasures

JEFF MINICK

In "What's Wrong With the World," G.K. Chesterton wrote, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly."

Here and elsewhere, Chesterton defends the amateur against the professional, what he called the "generalist" against the specialist. "Amateur" derives from the Latin "amare," "to love," and applies to anyone who performs a task or engages in an art, sport, or hobby out of love and not money. We run our fingers up and down a keyboard, we dig in the dirt and care for our beloved garden, we play golf or tennis for fun and exercise, or we scratch out some verse every morning before the rest of the household rises. We give ourselves to these things because they please us, not because we are particularly good at them.

In "Orthodoxy," Chesterton expands his definition of amateur, stating that "the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves—the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state."

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to the subject of art appreciation.

#### Here's an Opportunity

In this arena I am very much the amateur, untrained in aesthetics and often dazzled, dumbfounded, or depressed by a painting or a piece of statuary without really understanding why. Five years ago, a gift allowed me to spend a month in Italy, where almost daily I visited churches and museums, seeking relief from the brutal heat of the streets—it was the middle of summer, and Rome was experiencing a drought and temperatures in the 90s—and finding inspiration and beauty in the art of that ancient city. No guides and only the most cursory of books accompanied me on my explorations; I simply looked at paintings and sculpture, and took what pleasure I might from them.

Most of you reading these words are, I suspect, still in the pandemic shutdown, staying at home, entering stores only to buy essentials, prisoners of a sort in your own houses and apartments. With schools closed, many of you are teaching children or grandchildren at the dining room table, some of you through online courses offered by your child's school, some through independent learning.

Some of our politicians, past and present, have said, "You should never let a serious crisis go to waste." Well, I am going to turn that bit of cynicism on its head. Our present crisis has delivered a golden opportunity for us to visit the masterpieces of the past, share them with our young people, and discover in our excursions the hope, comfort, and strength such art affords us.



You may not necessarily agree with the experts about paintings. Sister Wendy Beckett's "The Story of Painting."

**2 Books**  
Because my public library is closed for the time being, and because I have

packed up 90 percent of my books in anticipation of a move, I have only two art books available to me: a jacketless, coffee-blotched, and beaten-up copy of Sister Wendy Beckett's "The Story of Painting" and Patrick De Rynck's marvelous "How to Read a Painting: Lessons From the Old Masters." In his excellent guide, De Rynck explores paintings from the late Middle Ages through the early 18th century, explaining to an audience often unfamiliar with Christian symbolism and mythological figures the meanings behind these great treasures.

Both books sit on a shelf beside my desk, and I open them frequently. On these excursions, I have realized that we don't always need to accept the opinions of the experts. Sister Wendy Beckett, for example, describes Georges de La Tour's "The Repentant Magdalen" by writing "the Magdalen does not so much repent as muse," whereas I find this portrait of quiet repentance much more realistic than some anguished and fevered portrait. So as we proceed, bear in mind that you are entitled to your own interpretation of some particular painting.

**Like poetry, like great literature, 'reading' a painting makes us more fully human.**

#### Online Art

Of course, we don't need books to make art a part of our lives or of our school curriculum. For better or for worse—in this case, for better—we live in an age when the world is at our doorstep, great art at our fingertips. We can open the screens of our electronic devices and find museums, galleries, and websites galore.

Let's begin with a visit to "Google Arts & Culture." Hit "Explore," scroll down a bit, click on "Explore by time and color," choose "Time," and click "1500" on the timeline, as I did, and you will be treated to an amazing array of great paintings.

Suppose we find ourselves enamored of the Dutch masters—not to be confused with the cigars. Off we zip wingless to Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum, where we can view at our leisure paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and their contemporaries, all living in what we now call the Dutch Golden Age of Painting. Here to our heart's content we can immerse ourselves in canvas, paint, brushstrokes, and light.

#### Lagniappe

Parents especially might employ these paintings as tools to teach not just art but also history, fashion, and geography. Suppose, for example, you decide to explore the work of Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. You Google his name, and there across the top of your screen appear dozens of his works depicting historical events, mythology, religion, and everyday life in Antwerp. Here are his paintings "Samson and Delilah," "Daniel in the Lions' Den," "The Fall of Phaeton," "Medusa," "Saint George and the Dragon," as well as portraits of various citizens, and much more.

Begin your adventure by selecting a particular painting, showing it to your children, and introducing them to the artist. Read with them a little about what the painting means, and then explore the story behind the art. Who were Samson and Delilah? Who was Medusa? You can charge off in all sorts of different directions. An example: Rubens's "Portrait of Susanna Lunden" or "The Four Philosophers," which Rubens created as a memorial to his deceased brother, might spark a discussion of fashion, hairstyles, and makeup of that time. Good detectives



Visit the famous art museums of the world—right now. The façade of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, as seen from Museum Square.

will engage in more online investigation of such topics.

(An aside: If your children tire of art, Good Housekeeping offers a link to many other virtual tours: museums, zoos, and amusement parks. Here are educational romps with creatures from sharks to elephants, and with historical artifacts from Ancient Egypt to the present time; you can even visit Disney World without shelling out money or standing in line.)

#### Connecting the Cultural Dots

When we study these paintings in this fashion—entering them instead of simply looking at them and moving on—we not only come to appreciate the artwork, but we also acquire what scholar, teacher, and author

E.D. Hirsch calls "cultural literacy," which he defines as the "network of information that all competent readers possess." Readers unfamiliar with fairy tales and traditional children's poetry, with Greek and Roman mythology, with Bible stories, and with other key elements of our civilization find themselves limited in their understanding of information and knowledge that was once relatively common among Europeans and Americans.

We live in an age when the visual—videos, television, and our electronic gadgets—dominates print. Many, for instance, prefer watching a movie about William Wallace than reading about him. The study of a masterpiece allows our children and us a meeting

place between what we see in a painting and what lies behind the painting, a nexus of entertainment and education allowing us to broaden our cultural literacy.

Like poetry, like great literature, "reading" a painting makes us more fully human, more aware of the sorrows and joys of human beings, connecting us to a past that can comfort our present and enlighten our future.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.



PUBLIC DOMAIN



PD-US

(Top) "The Repentant Magdalen," circa 1635–1640, by Georges de La Tour. Oil on canvas. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, National Gallery of Art.

(Above) "The Milkmaid," circa 1657–58, by Johannes Vermeer.

(Below) "Daniel in the Lions' Den," circa 1614–1616, by Peter Paul Rubens. Oil on canvas. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

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John Boyd Textiles Ltd. offers custom, hand-guided embroidery on all its horsehair fabrics, often using historic motifs.



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1. Natural horsehair waits to be hackled (combed).
2. To prepare it for weaving, the hair is brushed by pulling it through a hackle, a large comb with metal teeth.
3. Dyed horsehair is combed on a hackle in preparation for weaving.
4. John Boyd Textiles Ltd.'s unique looms, patented in 1872, are now powered by electricity.
5. Workers prepare a press full of horsehair fabric.
6. A press full of horsehair fabric is tightened.
7. Lowering rolls of horsehair fabric from a factory window.

## CRAFTSMANSHIP

# One of the World's Last Horsehair Weavers

How John Boyd Textiles Ltd. came to make a modern-historic fabric

LORRAINE FERRIER

For nearly 150 years, the production process at John Boyd Textiles Ltd. has barely changed. From its factory in Castle Cary, Somerset, in the southwest of England, John Boyd Textiles weaves horsehair cloth on the same looms that John Boyd patented in 1872, although the looms are now powered by electricity rather than steam, and before that, by a waterwheel.

As one of the world's last horsehair weavers, John Boyd Textiles ships its fabric worldwide. "We probably work with about 30 different countries around the world," said Anna Smith, managing director and owner of John Boyd Textiles. America and Germany are the company's biggest markets, both having had horsehair weaving industries.

## The Tradition of Horsehair Fabric in the UK

For centuries, up until the Industrial Revolution, horses were an indispensable part of daily life in England. They helped work the land and were the main mode of transportation. For practical purposes, working horses' tails were cut short, similar to some of the horses depicted by 18th-century painter George Stubbs, Smith explained. And in Victorian times, horse tails were cut fashionably short, she added.

In the UK, horsehair weaving was a cottage industry found mainly in Somerset (southwest England), Suffolk (southeast England), and Scotland: all agricultural areas with an abundant source of working horses, Smith said.

The earliest reference of horsehair being woven and used as upholstery cloth is from about 1750, she said. Horsehair was the fabric of choice for preeminent 18th-century designers such as

Thomas Chippendale and George Hepplewhite.

In the early 1800s, John Boyd, a textile merchant from Scotland, visited Castle Cary. Seeing the potential for horsehair weaving, he settled there and began weaving in his cottage. In 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne, Boyd began to expand his business, establishing a factory in 1851.

Up until the Elementary Education Act of 1870 that mandated children between the ages of 5 and 12 to attend school, children worked across all aspects of industry. Boyd's factory was no different. Children actually sat within each loom, passing up horsehair to the weavers hair by hair.

With the advent of the automobile, Castle Cary's supply of horsehair lessened, so the company directors traveled by train to London and met overseas horsehair brokers. Up until the 1905 Russian Revolution, John Boyd

Textiles imported horsehair from Russia.

Today, the company imports the horsehair differently. "Now it's mainly Mongolian and Siberian hair, which comes through China—so it's a bit like the old-fashioned silk route—and it usually takes around three to five months to import the hair," Smith said. Interestingly, a harsh climate such as Mongolia's is believed to grow stronger horsehair, she said.

## One-of-a-Kind Weaving

Most of the 12 staff members at John Boyd Textiles are locals, some of whom have worked at the company for nearly 40 years. Smith considers the company lucky to have such a workforce, one that's also multiskilled and able to cover each other's jobs.

Training is in-house and covers all aspects of the production process. "Weaving is the most skilled job, so we'd start off with processes like dispatching an order,

Working horses' tails are kept short for practical purposes, as in the George Stubbs painting "A Saddled Bay Hunter," 1786. Oil on panel; 21 3/4 inches by 27 3/4 inches. Berger Collection, Denver Art Museum.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



**Horsehair is cut from live horses' tails for the same reason live sheep are sheared for their wool.**

threading up the looms, warping [arranging the vertical yarn, or warp, on the loom in preparation for weaving], and then they'll move on to weaving," Smith said. "We're quite small-scale. We have about 30 looms and they each produce one piece [of cloth] a month, so 50 meters [about 54 yards] a month. So it's the same speed as hand weaving," she said. "Our fabrics are at least 70 percent horsehair. We don't mix other fibers into the weft."

Weft is the horizontal thread, in this case the horsehair, that is woven into the warp on the loom frame. John Boyd Textiles' warps are made from cotton, silk, or linen. "The looms are one-of-a-kind. "We have a unique picking mechanism, which you won't see on any other loom," Smith said. That mechanism does the same job the child workers did prior to 1870, selecting one hair at a time to weave into the cloth. The factory engineers make different "pickers" according to the hairs' thicknesses.

Most of the machine parts are manufactured in-house or sometimes specially commissioned, although general parts such as reeds and heddles (where the warp is threaded onto the loom) can be bought from outside suppliers.

## Weaving With Horsehair

John Boyd Textiles weaves two widths of horsehair cloth based on color: A black or dark-colored fabric and a narrower white or pale-colored fabric. White horsehair is much more expensive than its colored counterpart because

there's a greater demand for pure white hair, for violin bows, for example.

For horsehair weaving, the hair is cut from live horses' tails for the same reason that live sheep are sheared for their wool: Hair or wool from a dead animal doesn't have the same shine or vitality and won't dye properly, Smith said.

Once cut, the horsehair is cleaned and sorted, just like wool. Up until the 1950s, this sorting, known as hairdressing, happened at John Boyd Textiles, but now it occurs overseas before the horsehair is exported. A hairdresser sorts the hair into different lengths, sending the short horsehair to be used for brushes, sporrans (a pouch worn on kilts), and judges' wigs, for example. And the longer hair is used for things like violin bows, fishing lines, and rope; of course, it can also be woven into horsehair fabric.

"If you go far enough back, it was used as a stiffener for fabric in clothing, because crinoline was made out of horsehair," Smith said. The horsehair is dyed on-demand in small batches on the premises. "It is quite skilled because you're dealing with a natural material and that does vary a bit in color," she said. Nevertheless, just about any color can be produced.

Once dyed, the horsehair is pulled through a hackle (a comb with metal prongs) to prepare the hair for weaving. If white horsehair is used, all the dark hairs are taken out by hand. Then the horsehair is combed through before weaving. Once woven, the

fabric is pressed, giving it its sheen.

Customers prefer plain fabric for upholstery, particularly for furniture that won't often be recovered. The original classic plain black sateen horsehair fabric has always been popular, but Smith notes that the company is now producing more colored horsehair fabric—taupe, mushroom, and white—which is quite popular at the moment. The John Boyd Textiles herringbone design is particularly popular as a texture rather than a pattern, she added.

For nearly 30 years, John Boyd Textiles has worked with an embroiderer who uses an old embroidery machine to hand guide the stitching (hand-guided embroidery), often according to historic designs.

## Horsehair, the Modern-Historic Fabric

John Boyd Textiles' customers are mostly architects, designers, upholsterers, and antique restorers, as well as contractors for hotels, restaurants, corporate boardrooms, and the like. And the fashion industry uses horsehair for accessories like footwear, handbags, and belts, or for cuffs, collars, and jacket pocket edges.

Other trade comes from museums and historic buildings: "We do some work for the Oxbridge colleges, as most of them have horsehair fabric on their seats," Smith said.

In America, horsehair from John Boyd Textiles is in the White House, and Mount Vernon asked John Boyd to quote a price for

reupholstering the chairs that America's founding fathers sat on for the first cabinet meeting, Smith said.

Horsehair is incredibly unique. Not only does it last over 100 years, but "it passes all fire tests, so match and cigarette tests," she said. "It passes all the acoustic tests, so it's actually used in quite modern applications for speakers and cinema rooms." All these qualities make horsehair an attractive multipurpose fabric—enduring for generations, as our forefathers' furniture attests to.

To find out more about John Boyd Textiles' traditional horsehair fabric, visit [JohnBoydTextiles.co.uk](http://JohnBoydTextiles.co.uk)



John Boyd Textiles' black sateen is a historic horsehair fabric that remains a popular choice today. Puffen Upholstery, in Norway, covered these chairs.





**POPCORN AND INSPIRATION:  
FILMS THAT UPLIFT THE SOUL**

## A Deep, yet Uncomplicated Tale About Self-Discovery

IAN KANE

The year 2006 was certainly an interesting one for movies. The multiplexes were filled with filmgoers eager for cinematic escapism. Movies like “Casino Royale,” “X-Men: The Last Stand,” and “The Hills Have Eyes” were doing just that, thrilling and chilling audiences with violent tales of espionage, superheroes (and villains), and mutated cannibals, respectively. However, besides these big-budgeted displays of sound and fury, other filmmakers were taking a chance on tales with more positive messages.

**Dan begins a journey of self-discovery and spiritual awareness that puts him on the path of recovery.**

Director Victor Salva teamed up with screenwriter Kevin Bernhardt and together they adapted a bestselling book by Dan Millman called “Way of the Peaceful Warrior.” The result was a film simply titled “Peaceful Warrior.”

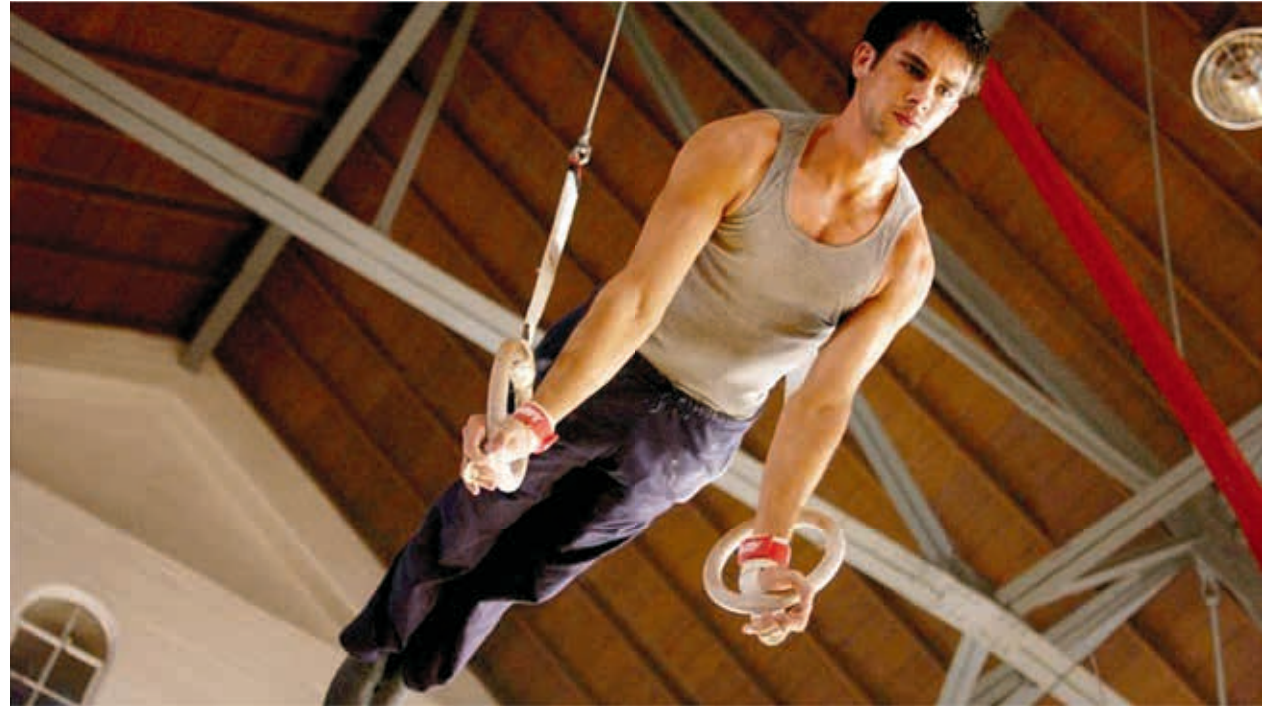
Based on Dan Millman’s early life (and starring Scott Mechlowicz as the lead), young and cocky Dan is a gifted gymnast from a well-to-do family. He has plenty of friends and girls eager for his attention. In other words, it would appear that he has it all.

However, although things seem to be going just dandy for Dan, he has a nagging feeling that something is missing. It’s an unsettling feeling that makes him question his very existence. He also has a disturbing nightmare where he’s attempting a high-risk maneuver on the parallel bars, falls off, and breaks his leg in multiple places.

After one such nightmare, Dan awakes and decides to go on a nocturnal run in order to release some of his pent-up anxiety. During his jog, he comes across a derelict-looking gas station where a middle-aged man in dusty coveralls is working under the hood of a car parked outside.

Dan begins a conversation with the man, whom he dubs “Socrates” (Nick Nolte) because the older man always seems to speak in parables and philosophical riddles. Because Dan has such hubris, Socrates might as well be speaking in an alien language—everything seems to go in one ear and right out of the other.

Later, Dan experiences a horrible motorcycle accident and breaks his leg in multiple places. He is told that, because of the severity of his injury, he’ll never



What if your dreams are suddenly shattered? Scott Mechlowicz in “Peaceful Warrior.”

be able to compete as an athlete again. With Dan’s dream world crumbling around him, he slowly begins to warm up to Socrates.

Thus, Socrates becomes somewhat of a mentor and spiritual guide for the young, troubled man. Dan begins a journey of self-discovery and spiritual awareness that puts him on the path of recovery. But with his disability, does he have enough belief in himself to overcome the greatest obstacle that he’s ever faced?

Although this film has a familiar narrative arc, here the lessons are told in an earnest way that piques one’s curiosity. Much of the spiritual wisdom that Socrates dispenses has a universal appeal that just about anybody can comprehend.

Acting-wise, Mechlowicz does a fantastic job of portraying a young, arrogant, hot-shot athlete. He seems to disappear into the role and even made me loathe him (a bit). However, by the end of the film, I was on the edge of my seat, rooting for him. Gravelly-voiced Nolte is likewise perfect in his role as the enigmatic mentor, who never gives up on chipping

away at Dan’s inflated ego.

While big movie studios are busy putting out films about families breaking up, senseless and violent rampages, and other unsavory debris, “Peaceful Warrior” is an uncomplicated, uplifting film that should inspire all but the most jaded.

*Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit [DreamFlightEnt.com](http://DreamFlightEnt.com) or contact him at [Twitter.com/ImIanKane](https://twitter.com/ImIanKane)*

### ‘Peaceful Warrior’

**Director**  
Victor Salva  
**Starring**  
Scott Mechlowicz, Nick Nolte, Amy Smart  
**Running Time**  
2 hours  
**Rated**  
PG-13  
**Release Date**  
June 23, 2006  
★★★★☆



Scott Mechlowicz (L) and Nick Nolte in “Peaceful Warrior.”

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