

WEEK 1, 2021

THE EPOCH TIMES
ARTS &
CULTURE

COURTESY OF WAYNE BARNES



TAKING YOU THERE

A Mountain of a Decision

WAYNE A. BARNES

Some pieces of art move me so that I am compelled to write about them—what they look like, but more often, how I see the scene in its own history. This is what the series “Taking You There” is about.

On Christmas break during my last year of law school in 1970, I felt pretty good, with one semester to go before I might take on the world and become a practicing attorney. I borrowed my mother’s old gray Rambler

and drove to the nearby Cherry Hill Mall in South Jersey for some last-minute shopping. I chanced to walk into an art gallery, wondering what mall art might look like. High up on a wall was a painting that took my breath away.

As a poor boy from Philadelphia, which is a world-class, cultured city with museums aplenty, I always saw art as something you looked at on someone else’s wall, usually in one of those museums.

Continued on Page 4

“The Mountain and the Valley,” circa 1970, although signed, by an unknown artist. Oil on canvas, 48 inches by 36 inches.



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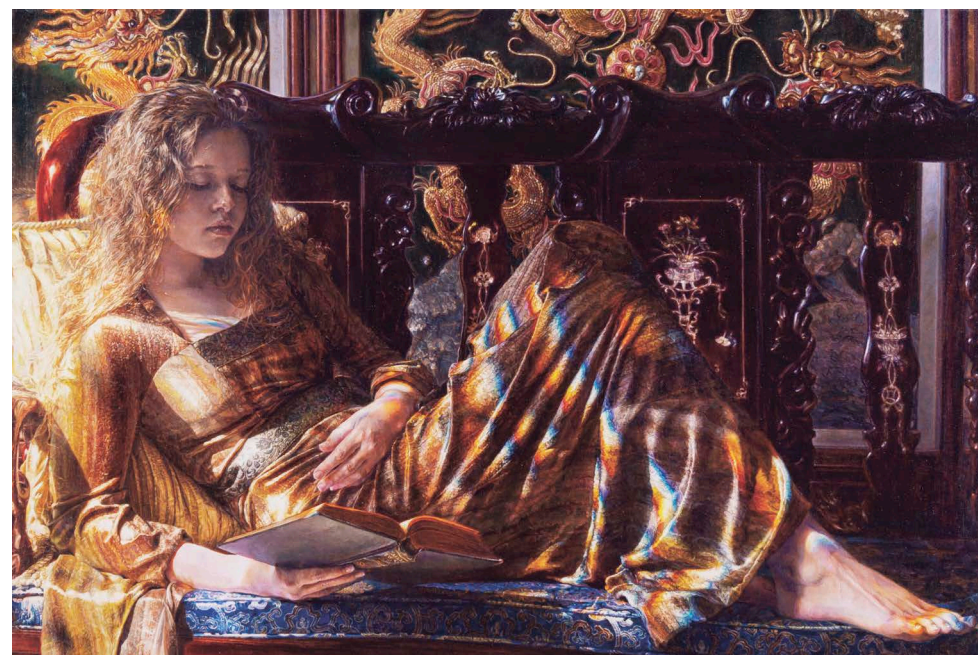
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James Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Lights, Camera, Action: Hollywood and the American Dream

JEFF MINICK

In the first half of the 20th century, the rest of the world learned much of what it knew about America from motion pictures. The cameras of Hollywood captured the American spirit and shipped those images around the globe—our respect for liberty and self-reliance, our love for the underdog, our sentimental attachments to everything from our country to children, our generosity, and our sense of humor.

In these films were iconic actors who came to represent our country. Here, for example, is what actress Maureen O'Hara once said before Congress: "To the people of the world, John Wayne is not just an actor, and a very fine actor, John Wayne is the United States of America. He is what they believe it to be. He is what they hope it will be. And he is what they hope it always will be." Other performers—Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Stewart, Clark Gable, Elizabeth Taylor, Katharine Hepburn, and more—also seemed, both to their fellow citizens and to foreigners, quintessentially American.

And most of the films written and produced in those days celebrated our country, albeit often unintentionally. From the glamorous characters found in "The Thin Man" to the beaten-down souls in "The Grapes of Wrath," Americans recognized themselves or their neighbors, and took joy and solace from that recognition.

In our own disquieting time of pandemic and division, let's look back at some of these films and remember the American Dream.

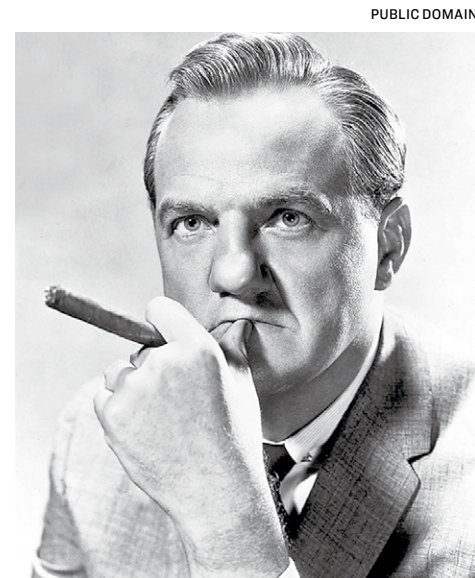
'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn'

Released in 1945, and based on Betty Smith's novel by the same name, this movie about an immigrant family living in Brooklyn, New York, at the beginning of the 20th century reminds us of several American values: self-reliance, the importance of work, and the freedom we have to pursue our dreams.

Though "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" offers an excellent cast, the performances of Peggy Ann Garner as Francie Nolan and Dorothy McGuire as her mother, Katie, make this movie one of the best films of its time.

Francie is a young girl with big dreams, different from those around her because she so highly values books and learning; she is "the tree" growing in Brooklyn. Stouthearted Katie carries the family financially by her penny pinching and hard work. The interplay between mother and daughter, and between Francie and her father (James Dunn), is moving and beautiful. It's a movie that touches me every time I see it.

Once, when Katie questions the value of reading the Bible and Shakespeare nightly with her children, her mother interrupts her to say: "This reading will



A publicity photo of Karl Malden, circa 1950, who plays an impassioned priest in the 1954 film "On the Waterfront."

not stop ... In that old country, a child can rise no higher than this father's state. But here in this place, each one is free to go as far as he's good to make of himself. This way, the child can be better than the parent, and this is the true way things grow better."

Grandma understood the importance of education.

'On the Waterfront'

Elia Kazan's hard-hitting film about union corruption on the shipping docks finds workers, a priest, and a young woman (Eva Marie Saint) battling an evil boss and his cronies.

In one scene, one of the dockworkers, Kayo Dugan (Pat Henning), who is willing to testify to the corruption of the union, is murdered while unloading a ship. Father Barry (Karl Malden) has promised to go the last mile for those willing to fight the union bosses, and so he enters the ship's hold, stands over Kayo's corpse, and delivers a speech.

Here is a part of that eulogy that has particular relevance to this present moment in our history:

"Some people think the crucifixion only took place on Cavalry. They better wise up! Taking Joey Doyle's life to stop him from testifying is a crucifixion. And dropping a sling on Kayo Dugan because he was ready to spill his guts tomorrow, that's a crucifixion. And every time the Mob puts the pressure on a good man, tries to stop him from doing his duty as a citizen, that's a crucifixion. And anybody who sits around and lets it happen, keeps silent about something he knows that happened, shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of our Lord to see if he was dead."

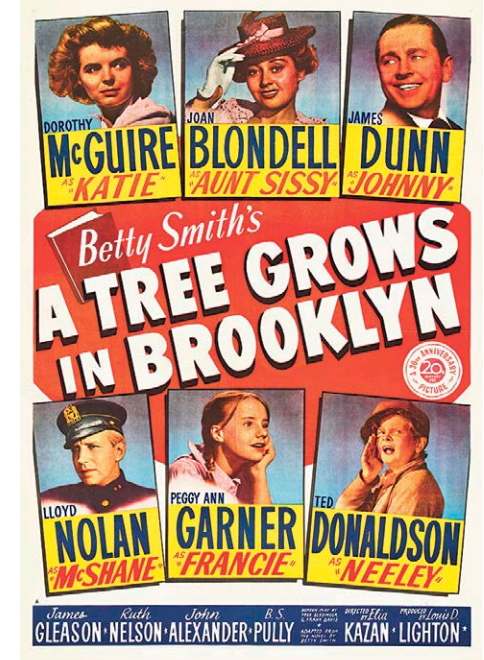
The priest's words inspire Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando), a one-time professional boxer working for the Mob, to take a stand against his immoral employers.

Films like "On the Waterfront" offer that same inspiration to us in our troubled times.



FOX PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

PUBLIC DOMAIN



(Above) A poster for the 1945 film "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn."

(Left) Hollywood stars like John Wayne depicted quintessential American traits.

'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington'

A political machine must select a replacement for a recently deceased U.S. Senator. The governor who is a part of that machine selects Jefferson Smith (Jimmy Stewart), head of the Boy Rangers, as someone pleasing to the people, naïve, and therefore easily manipulated.

When Smith eventually realizes the level of rot and corruption in his home state and tries to expose it, he finds himself in danger of being expelled from the Senate by means of lies and slander. Following the advice of Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur), who knows the ins and outs of politics and law, Smith fights back with a filibuster, speaking for more than 20 hours until he finally collapses. The fellow senator from his state then breaks down from remorse and confesses the fraud that he and others had perpetuated.

At one point in this fine movie, Jefferson Smith states: "And this country is bigger than the Taylors, or you, or me, or anything else. Great principles don't get lost once they come to light; they're right here! You just have to see them again."

Films like 'On the Waterfront' offer inspiration to us in our troubled times.

As Smith says, our great principles are still right here. The good news today for America is that more and more people are opening their eyes and seeing them again.

And Many More

Many other films, old and new, can give us a sense of pride in our country and its people.

The beloved classic "It's a Wonderful Life," the Westerns of John Wayne, musicals like "Singin' in the Rain" and "South Pacific," "12 Angry Men"—these are just a few of the movies that would make my list, and I'm sure every reader could come up with a dozen more classics.

And though we often hear that liberal and leftist scriptwriters and directors today put out movies denigrating or attacking America, I can think of plenty of more recent films celebrating both our past and our way of life: "The Patriot" and "We Were Soldiers" starring Mel Gibson, and "Hacksaw Ridge," which he directed; Ron Howard's "Cinderella Man" and "Apollo 13"; "The Pursuit of Happyness"; "Tender Mercies"; and that

wonderful series about a Founding Father, "John Adams."

My readers, I am certain, could name many more good movies about our country.

The Dream

Hollywood showed the world the American Dream, but it didn't create that dream. That dream was 200 years in the making before Hollywood began producing pictures.

Americans created that Dream. They're the ones—the pioneers, the men who wrote our Constitution, the men and women who raised their families in misery and hardship, the soldiers who fought our wars, and the civilians who fought for rights for all Americans, the great and the insignificant—who built and loved this country.

In "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," Jefferson Smith declares, "Liberty's too precious a thing to be buried in books ... Men should hold it up in front of them every single day of their lives and say: 'I'm free to think and to speak.'"

That's America. That's the Dream.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminary students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

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“Roman Forum, Rome,” 19th century. Micromosaic reset in gold as a brooch, with alternating cabochon aquamarines with side gold dots, and faceted aquamarines around bezel; 2 1/8 inches by 2 1/2 inches. Collection of Elizabeth Locke.



“Colosseum, Rome,” 19th century. Micromosaic reset in a metal box detailed with enamel paint; 1 3/4 inches by 1 3/4 inches by 1 1/2 inches. Collection of Elizabeth Locke.

BEHOLD THE BEAUTY

Marvelous Minute Treasures From European Grand Tours

LORRAINE FERRIER

Unique 18th- and 19th-century tourist treasures, many with a twist, are currently on display in the exhibition “A Return to the Grand Tour: Micromosaic Jewels From the Collection of Elizabeth Locke,” at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina.

Made from teeny-tiny pieces of colored glass, micromosaics make up the most amazing, almost painterly pictures depicting all manner of things. The exhibition’s micromosaics include quintessential scenes of Rome: the people, landscapes, and, of course, famous architecture such as the Colosseum, St. Peter’s Square, and the Roman Forum.

Some of the best micromosaics contain an astounding 3,000 to 5,000 tiles per square inch. The exhibition’s micromosaics contain up to 1,400 tiles per square inch.

A Jeweler’s Love for Micromosaics

Locke, a contemporary jewelry designer, first fell in love with micromosaics while

living in Florence, Italy. In 1989, she bought her first micromosaic: a small rectangle of the Temple of Vesta. Locke reset the piece in 19-karat hand-hammered gold and cabochon stones, in a style influenced by neoclassical design.

Locke has now amassed a collection of over 100 pieces, 92 of which are featured in the exhibition. Here’s the exhibition’s twist: She has reset most of the micromosaics in her renowned neoclassical style.

Locke is tapping into an old tradition. From the 17th to the 19th century, wealthy Europeans on their Grand Tour of Italy used to buy micromosaics as jewelry and souvenirs. Sometimes the micromosaics would be inlaid into furniture, snuff, or decorative boxes. An example of the last is in the exhibition.

Many Italian micromosaics were sent straight to jewelers in Paris and London to be set into jewelry. Micromosaic jewelry fell out of favor in the 1870s.

Making Micromosaics

According to a video from the Victoria and Albert Museum, a micromosaic artist fus-

es or combines together different colored glass mosaic tiles to create an assortment of colors, unique in size and shape. Then the artist melts the tiles in a metal crucible and pulls the molten glass into long canes that solidify when cooled. The artist scores the canes and carefully snaps them into tiny, oblong pieces.

Then the artist prepares a metal base with paste, into which he or she then marks the design. Using tweezers, the artist then painstakingly places each teeny-tiny mosaic piece onto the paste.

Once the picture is complete, the artist polishes the micromosaic by applying a couple of wax coatings and sanding to smooth the surface.

To find out more about the exhibition “A Return to the Grand Tour: Micromosaic Jewels From the Collection of Elizabeth Locke,” which runs until Jan. 10, 2021, at the Gibbes Museum of Art, visit GibbesMuseum.org

This exhibition is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

Micromosaics in Ancient Times

Micromosaics existed in the ancient world. Roman artists made them at sites such as Pompeii, and Byzantine artists made micromosaics of religious icons.



“Walking Butterfly,” 19th century, attributed to Giacomo Raffaelli. Micromosaic reset in gold as a pendant, with gold bezel, hinged bale; 1 3/8 by 1 3/8 inches. Collection of Elizabeth Locke.



“Parrot, Rome,” 19th century. Micromosaic reset in gold as a pendant, with four sets of tsavorite and demantoid garnets on bezel; 2 inches by 1 3/4 inches.

TAKING YOU THERE

A Mountain of a Decision

Continued from Page 1

I didn’t know anyone who actually owned art.

Charlie, a perky art store saleslady, was knowledgeable and not much older than I was at the time. She saw my reaction and looked up to see what had caused it. It was a snowcapped mountain, its white fields flowing down to the tallest of conifers and a verdant valley beyond, then a shimmering lake surrounded by lush vegetation. The image was presented in a large, three-by-four-foot frame.

My brain was still in the art-belongs-to-someone-else mode, and I could only admire it. Yet this one was for sale! Could I wrap my brain around the idea? I could feel my synapses firing off, charging into new cranial territory.

The price, \$395!

In 1970, this was a huge amount of money for a poor law student. Purchasing it was out of the question, financially and psychologically. Who in my circle of friends and family would have even considered it? But there was something else.

Two summers before, I had a life-changing experience. After the first year of law school, my favorite dorm counselee at Villanova University called me to say that he and his uncle would be driving across the United States, and back, on a three-week trip. I was invited. Having never been west of the Mississippi River, and hardly ever west of the Susquehanna, I decided to take

the plunge.

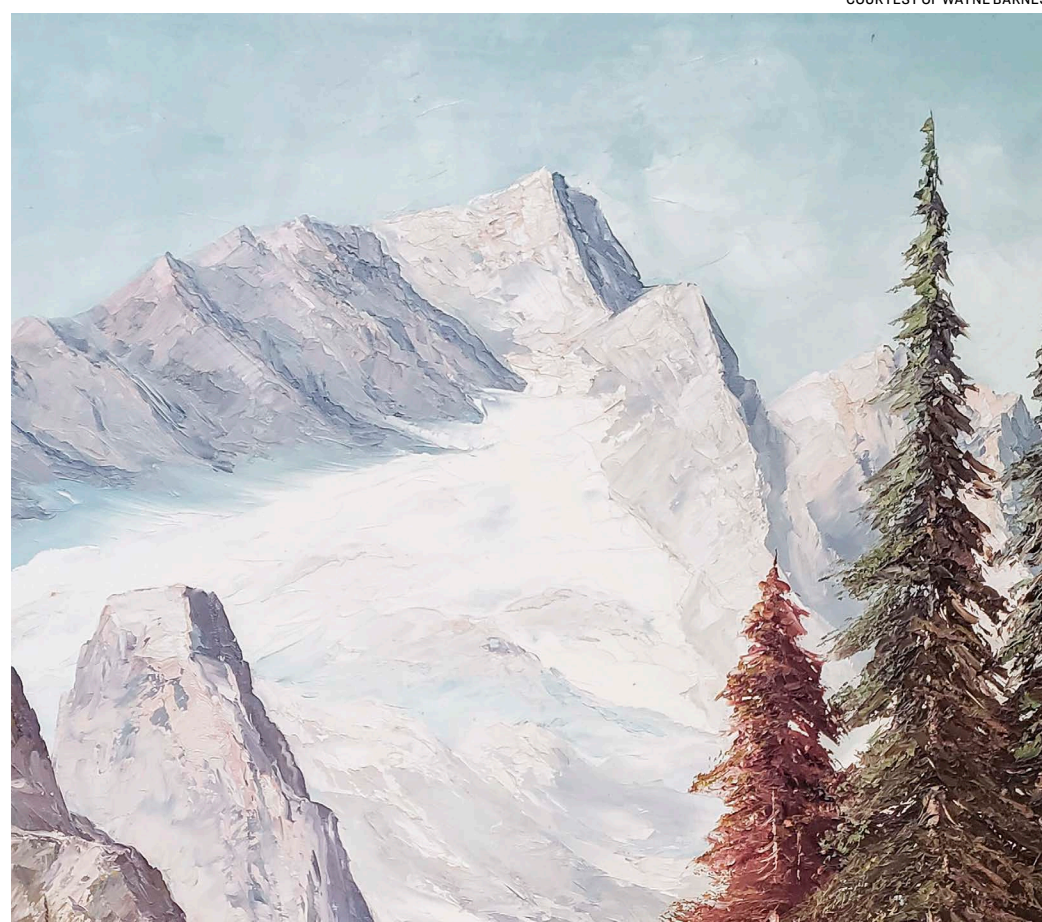
For the first time, I saw our grand land in person. The St. Louis Arch, endless fields of corn and wheat, and the prairie rising slowly to the Rockies. We spent a full day in Rocky Mountain National Park, two hours from Denver. It began before daybreak with the goal of climbing a challenging mountain, Hallett Peak, at 12,713 feet. The summit had to be achieved by noon in order to avoid the threat of thunderstorms at the top, a perilous possibility. But the morning sky turned a brilliant blue. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this cited boy walking in such a place.

We spent hours hiking—up Flattop Mountain to Hallett Peak, down across the Tyndall Glacier, past Shark’s Tooth, then luxuriating in the billowing grasses around Dream Lake. I didn’t want the day to end.

Astonishingly, now, nearly two years later, this was the exact scene of the painting in the gallery—my Hallett Peak!

But what could I do about it? I reviewed my finances. I had made the final payment for my last year of law school, and with no loans. As a dorm counselor, my room and board was covered, and I still had some money tucked away from the last summer’s legal research job. But could I afford to buy this massive oil painting? It seemed crazy.

It didn’t fit into the car, my dorm was no place for it, and it would hardly fit on a wall in my parents’ modest split-level house, if they would even let me hang it there. But



Hallett Peak in Colorado, as depicted in a detail from “The Mountain and the Valley.”

did it matter if I didn’t have a place to put it? It was all too much.

I lowered my chin, gave thanks to Charlie, and ambled out of the store.

When I got up the next morning, I wanted to visit the painting once more. The old Rambler chugged to the mall, but when I entered the gallery, there was a huge expanse of empty space where the mountain had been. I was devastated and turned to Charlie.

Only a few minutes after I had left the day before, a man had come into the store and bought it with a snap decision. It had hung there for several months, but only the two of us expressed any real interest. Now, it was gone.

I felt drained, but those synapses were firing off again. I was learning a lesson. I had not known was there to learn. It is more than, “He who hesitates....” It was a life lesson. Take a step back to see a larger

perspective. I had come to a demarcation—end of education, beginning of whatever comes next. I was standing at that line, hovering over it, one foot raised and ready to cross to the other side. But I hadn’t done it, and the opportunity had been right there. I imagined Hallett Peak on a wall I did not yet own and could hardly picture, but this is why it’s called “the future.” You don’t know what it will bring, what opportunities will come. Right then I felt dismal. A unique painting, which recalled a singular experience for me, was on someone else’s wall. He was older, perhaps wiser, and had made a decision, while I had not.

The weeks passed at school, and soon it was the Easter break. In South Jersey again, the old Rambler rumbled under me and back to the mall. I wasn’t looking for art, just living.

I entered the gallery and could not stop myself from looking up to where the mountain had been four months before. I wondered what had replaced it, or if its spot was still empty, so irreplaceable it was in my mind.

Then a shock almost knocked me over. The mountain—my mountain—was back up on the wall!

Charlie was already walking toward me. She’d had no way to reach me to tell me what had happened.

The purchaser had returned with the painting the very next day, not long after I had left the store. It had been too large for the space over his fireplace between the mantel and ceiling, so it had been on display back in the gallery ever since.

Now my synapses didn’t need new paths in my brain to fire off in an uncharted direction. I had made this decision too late, four months ago, and pulled out my

checkbook. The painting’s size, and where to hang it, didn’t matter. I would find a way to make it work.

It ended up boxed and tied to the roof of the Rambler. The short stairs in my parents’ split-level did afford enough wall space to hang it, just barely.

For the years through the first part of my FBI career, I would see the painting only when visiting my parents, who, I am happy to say, loved it. A piece of modern art might have given them angst, but this scene drew you in so you could almost feel yourself breathing its mountain air—even standing in flat South Jersey.

While others dither, you act quickly and with determination. You will succeed more often than not.

It wasn’t until 1979, when I bought a house with a broad stairway and a high brick wall, that the mountain finally found a place in a home of my own.

I have stood and admired it, at some time during almost every day, for over 40 years. Reflecting on my initial indecision about buying it, I had been too hesitant and wanted more facts, better finances, and a sure way to cart it home. I was even concerned about what others would think. All of that brought about a poor result—taking no action. Hindsight gave me the perspective to realize this. I would not make the same mistake again.

I looked out and observed all that existed in my reachable world, evolving and swirling before my feet.

The climb up had shown the ruggedness of the earth’s exterior, while the summit began a path down to Shangri-La.

Snowfields are 12,000 feet up, 30 feet

thick, and hundreds of yards wide and long. The sweet breath of spring brings melting snow that tunnels beneath this frozen hulk. It hollows out a path through the summer and steadily forms tributaries, replenishing rivers below.

The valley comes into clearer view while hiking down through scattered clouds, then past flowering meadows with butterflies flitting and warblers warbling. Nearby, a brook babbles, happy for the annual thaw. Around and over boulders of gray and banks of green it flows, to soothe a weary climbing heart and mind—and lungs as well!

With the valley air, you catch your breath, the better to perceive the wonders around you.

You reach the shore of a crystal lake, and it invites you to rest awhile. You find comfort on the thickest mattress of wild grass upon the earth.

I slept for half an hour, the sun’s glorious rays healing my mind from weary into comprehending bliss.

Ancient logs still lie from when the mountain lion and its prey ran free, while towering trees stand proud in their own posterity.

It is nature’s collaboration—extraordinary sights, sounds, and fragrances—synthesized to bring the ultimate sensations of both peacefulness and elation.

I will, I must, return to this valley—if only in my mind.

I have carried this art lesson with me throughout my life and made some great decisions, only some about buying art. When you have an I-have-been-here-before moment, you know the answer. While others dither, you act quickly and with determination. You will succeed more often than not. That is the lesson from the mountain. I reflect on it every time I look at my beautiful painting, high up on the wall of my cathedral ceiling.

Now, I come to the right conclusion the first time.

The following essay was originally written on Aug. 16, 1969, at the age of 22, the day after the climb up to Hallett Peak, a year and a half before the painting was purchased.

Taking You There
This day was marked by grandeur, which before was unimaginable to me.

Ascending the Colorado mountain took more breath than I felt I could inhale. Finally, achieving its apex brought exhilaration I had not known.

A mountain to be climbed is not the conquering of nature. Conquering to utter defeat would be the felling of a virgin forest to stump and bare soil. That is not the feeling I held.

To have mounted that peak was to stand atop what nature had achieved, which it took millions of years to gather, mold, and form.

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Wayne A. Barnes was an FBI agent for 29 years working counterintelligence. He had many undercover assignments, including as a member of the Black Panthers. His first spy stories were from debriefing Soviet KGB defectors. He now investigates privately in South Florida.

ARCHITECTURE

A Designer Reveals the Higher Purpose of Architecture

Architecture should lift you up to the heavens

J.H. WHITE

NEW HOPE, N.Y.—“If you sing the perfect note right in the center stage, the person at the back of the amphitheater can hear it just as well as a person in the front,” says James H. Smith, educator and founder of Cartio, an architectural photography and design atelier. The ancient Greek amphitheaters “aren’t something that just happened by mistake. This was highly advanced design.”

Smith now designs homes in New York, but he grew up in Australia. His father was a pilot, so they visited many places in his youth. He’ll always remember his trip to Greece as a boy. Walking around Athens, he noticed the beautiful sculptures and architectural ornamentation. He recalls the public squares that dropped 10 feet below street level, revealing ancient ruins. The architecture, nestled into the fabric of the city, created a lasting impression on him.

“This whole art form and ancient wisdom was right there in front of you, present in people’s everyday life,” he says of the city’s ancient architecture.

Smith explains that the ancient Greek philosophers inspired a spiritual realm of thought that set the tone for the designs of subsequent classical architects. Plato, for example, understood higher truths and the connection between humanity and divinity.

“There is beauty and order in higher realms of existence from which we all came,” Smith says of Plato’s philosophy. “Proportion, rhythm, color, space, light, geometry, and ornament would come together to create unity, order, and beauty. These carefully composed buildings stimulate the soul as we connect with the very nature of creation.”

The Parthenon exudes that deep feeling. “It is stunning, so bold and beautiful,” sitting atop the Acropolis, overlooking the city, Smith says. “It has a real, majestic presence to it.”

Smith believes that the role of classical architecture has a higher purpose.

“Passive daily experience of classically inspired settings creates semidivine living environments and, in this way, the human realm aligns with the divine,” he says.

When the Noise Fades, Beauty Appears Through young adulthood, Smith had explored different spiritual disciplines. A good friend introduced him to Falun Dafa, a Chinese practice that changed his life.

Smith had fractured his back, and when he began doing the gentle Falun Dafa qi-gong exercises, within weeks the injury mended itself. His posture straightened and his sleep improved. But the practice didn’t just elevate his physical body.

“Falun Dafa really started to clear out my mind,” he says. “Gradually, over time, all that background noise sifted away.” He likens it to living in the city. You get used to the cars honking and city sounds. When you drive out to the country, all of a sudden it’s so peaceful.

“Cultivation is like that; the mind clears and opens. In that process, when the haze cleared, I started to observe beauty more.” During his first trip to Italy, for example, he was awestruck when he entered a piazza and came upon the beauty of one building with a noble travertine facade.

“It wasn’t extravagant. It was just so elegantly beautiful,” Smith says. He owes the experience to his spiritual practice, which gave him the mental tranquility to slow down and appreciate its simple beauty.

“In that peaceful state of mind, the beauty, the power of classical architecture really hit me. It just stops you in your place. It connects straight to your heart,” he says. That trip inspired him to later become a New Classical designer.



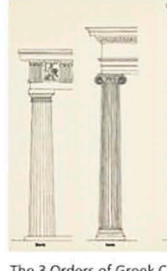
(Left) The Seid House, a New Classical house that James H. Smith designed. (Right) Petit Trianon, a neoclassical-style chateau at Versailles.



The Ionic Order



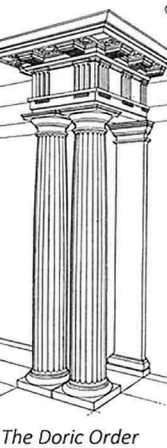
Plato, born 427 BC from Raphael's School of Athens



The 3 Orders of Greek Classical Architecture

When man brings order to his creations, a semi-divine living environment is established

Classical Architecture



The Doric Order



The Tempietto expresses the Renaissance ideal of perfection & was known as the "jewel" of the Renaissance, Designed by Donato Bramante, 1502, Rome, Italy

(Above) Educational display boards from presentations that James H. Smith has given on the nature of classically inspired architecture from ancient Greece to the Renaissance. (Below) Architect and architectural photographer James H. Smith.

Learning From the Renaissance

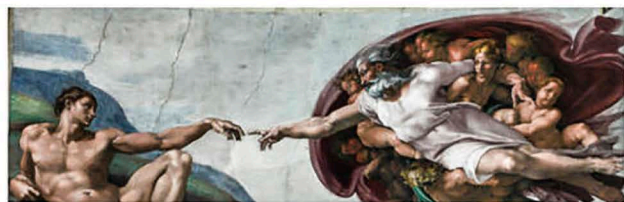
“Architecture integrates the visual arts,” says Smith, who had been a sculptor before studying architecture. “It learns from and brings together the beauty of painting and sculpture, integrating them into people’s lives,” he says.

Smith says that in addition to studying visual arts, photography has helped his understanding of design.

“Photography gives you the foundational understanding of design. Line, tone, texture, shape, and color are the fundamentals of overall composition in photography,” which translate to designing a house, he says.

Similarly, during the Renaissance, architects grasped compositional fundamen-

CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURE



Michelangelo depicts a moment of divine creation

The Rules of Art & Architecture

- Order
- Proportion
- Symmetry
- Geometry
- Rhythm
- Ornament

Create Beauty and A Unified Composition



The Vitruvian Man, Leonardo da Vinci 1490

The Vitruvian Man reveals Order & Proportion in divine creation.

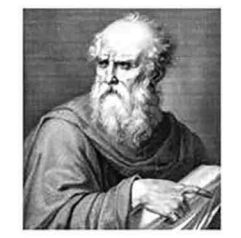
When combined with the rules of art, it give rise to

Harmony & Beauty

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF JAMES H. SMITH



The Corinthian Order

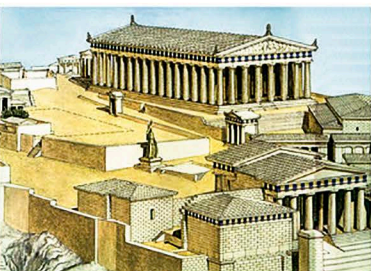


The Grandfather of Architecture, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio C.80-70 BC - after c. 15 BC.

Good design in architecture is

Useful, Durable, & Beautiful

The ideal city, attributed to Luciano Laurana or Melozzo da Forlì. 15th C



The Parthenon 447–432 BC, Athens, Greece, Designed by Iktinos, Kallikrates & Phidias (sculptor) Directed by the Athenian statesman, Pericles



built to honour the Greek Goddess and Patron of Athens, Athena



The Corinthian Order

It was adopted by the Romans at the outset of the Roman Empire



The Pantheon: a temple devoted to all the gods. Built between 17–15 BC, Rome, Italy. By consul Agrippa under Emperor, Hadrian's Rule of the Roman Empire

Was revived in Florence and reached its peak during the Renaissance



The Florence Cathedral, when complete, sent shock waves out across Europe. The Renaissance had begun. Designed by Filippo Brunelleschi in Florence Italy. Built from 1420 to 1436 in the Italian Renaissance



Villa La Rotonda is a Renaissance villa just outside Vicenza in northern Italy. Designed by Andrea Palladio - completed in the 1590's

Musical Harmony was applied to the proportions of Architecture to create Visual Harmony



The dome has a diameter of 142 feet/43 m is the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome



“In three years of undergrad and two years postgrad, I don’t remember a single class about aesthetic composition. Proportion was just a word that was said to critique your work, but it was never taught,” says Smith,

who attended a top design school in Australia. “We weren’t taught some of the basic grammar of the language we were trying to learn.”

“Beauty is what brings delight to people,” Smith says. Schools in the past systematically taught and created beauty. Beautiful architecture is ubiquitous throughout Europe. On one recent trip, he visited Versailles.

While periods after the Renaissance in Italy became overly ornate, Smith believes that in France, King Louis XIV further improved the era’s elegance. “King Louis XIV kept the simplicity of the Renaissance, but he refined it, made it very tasteful, elegant, and nuanced,” he says. That’s the style of architecture inspiring Smith’s current designs, he says.

After Louis XIV set the standard, others carried it on. Louis XV, for example, built the Petit Trianon, a neoclassical-style chateau at Versailles.

“It had this propriety or nobility to it. The proportions are simple; the building is astute,” Smith says. “The way the French windows have this verticality to it, ornamented elegantly. They speak to my inner realm. It makes me feel more upright as a person and more alive,” he says.

Smith believes that this stimulating effect is a moment when we connect to our true selves that originated in the higher realms, as discussed by Plato.

“Classical settings create noble, upright, and dignified living environments that stimulate the true self within each of us and evoke one’s genuine true character.”

J.H. White is an arts, culture, and men’s fashion journalist living in New York.



FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON

Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting in the movies.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION Harley-Davidson Culture Is Therapy for US War Vets

MARK JACKSON

You can’t say that Harley-Davidson culture is strictly American anymore; the entire world has Harley culture happening now. But America’s the originator and main influencer. One look at the following random (and minimal) list of well-known Harley enthusiasts makes it easy to see why:

Clark Gable, Elizabeth Taylor, Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando, Bridgette Bardot, James Dean, Steve McQueen, Ann Margaret, Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Cher, Johnny Depp, Keanu Reeves, Justin Timberlake, Miley Cyrus, George Clooney, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Brad Pitt, Jason Momoa, Pamela Anderson, Woody Harrelson, Bruce Springsteen, Bruce Willis, Pink, Sylvester Stallone, Mickey Rourke, James Caan, K.D. Lang, Harrison Ford, Lou Reed, James Gandolfini, and Tina Turner.

Harley-Davidson is also, generally speaking, the outlaw (“1-percent”) motorcycle club bike of choice. However, those who watched the FX show “Sons of Anarchy,” about that very topic, might be under the impression that they now know quite a bit about biker culture in America.

A good remedy to thinking that “Anarchy” is what American motorcycle club culture is all about is watching the fine documentary “Stray Dog” (winner at the 2014 Los Angeles Film Festival) by director Debra Granik. Granik launched Jennifer Lawrence’s star into the stratosphere with the Ozark Mountain tale “Winter’s Bone.”

Granik goes back to the Ozarks to have a look at lawful biker culture. There are many reasons why people ride, but what “Stray Dog” reveals is that most military veterans who’ve experienced the hyperawareness of combat come away from that experience with a powerful addiction, in addition to their PTSD. The hyperfocus needed for motorcycling provides a fix for that adrenaline addiction. As one young Desert Storm veteran relates, the rush of having been the 50-caliber roof-gunner on a combat vehicle makes him now need the experience of the open road rushing beneath his Harley V-twin Shovelhead engine.

Granik’s “Stray Dog” is a stark, insightful portrayal of the U.S. biker culture that overlaps with American trailer-park culture, veteran culture, gun culture, hunting culture, military culture, NASCAR culture, eastern U.S. mountain range culture, tattoo culture, beard culture, and home distillery culture, among others. This film covers so much American culture, you can easily make the argument that the lump sum of the above is just American culture, period. That is, it’s anywhere in the USA somewhat removed from urban and suburban areas. In fact, it’s probably safe to say that, being the most war-nation ever, perhaps America, like the biker tattoo, was “Born to Ride.”

Star of the Show

The film’s all about one Ronnie Hall—aka “Stray Dog.” He’s a head-to-toe Harley-accoutrement-clad, chopper-riding, medal-festooned, glad-handing, 60-something Vietnam vet. Operator of the At Ease trailer park (just outside Branson, Missouri), and hirsute multicultural family patriarch.

Granik had cast him in “Winter’s Bone” as a local Ozark crime warlord (along with a couple of mean-looking biker buds), and found him to be so interesting that she con-

(Top left) Ron “Stray Dog” Hall (R) with great-grandson Teddy in the documentary film “Stray Dog.”

(Top middle) Ron “Stray Dog” Hall (center, R) and fellow veterans in prayer with Annie Washington (center, L), who lost her daughter in Afghanistan, in the documentary film “Stray Dog.”

(Top right) Ron “Stray Dog” Hall and his wife, Alicia, on the “Run to the Wall” organized motorcycle trip to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the documentary “Stray Dog.” (Bottom) Ron “Stray Dog” Hall and wife, Alicia, head to D.C. in the documentary film “Stray Dog.”

(Bottom) Ron “Stray Dog” Hall and wife, Alicia, head to D.C. in the documentary film “Stray Dog.”

It’s understated in the film, but Hall still has nightmares from jungle warfare fought with the 4th Infantry Division nearly half a century ago. He thinks the entire war was a mistake now, and the spoils-of-war ear necklace he made in his fool youth weighs in extremis upon his soul. “It was all so unnecessary,” he says. However, he’s still outraged at the hostility and indifference that soldiers encountered when they returned from Vietnam.

40 Acres and an Iron Mule

Hall lives with a collection of small dogs in a beat-up trailer on a beaten dirt patch. He’s king of this trailer community, renting space to RV owners.

As director Granik said in the Q&A at the press screening, “Small dogs are the little-known therapy for war veterans. They carry them, keep them close to their bodies like extra hearts.” Hall’s got four. Hence, his nickname.

Hall recommends therapy to all fellow vets who’ll listen, and they do listen. Especially the elderly fellow ex-soldier who breaks down after relating his personal POW experience: He’d witnessed a young captive American soldier’s arms being macheted at the wrists.

The key is to get a psychotherapist who’s a vet and who knows. As vets say, “If you ain’t been there, then shut up” (a mild rendition of the actual phrase). Hall’s therapist asks him, “If you forgive yourself, would you be dishonoring them?” to which he replies with a vehement “Yes.” And with the procession of gatherings and rituals and reenactments and grief on display in the

Documentary
Director
Debra Granik
Starring
Ronnie Hall
Running Time
1 hour, 38 minutes
Release Date
June 13, 2014
★★★★★



tinued to follow him around with a camera for a couple of years.

But this is no “Duck Dynasty” or “Honey Boo Boo” type exploitation. Great lessons and wisdom abound in the marginal places in life. But as mentioned, in the United States, this lifestyle is not really all that marginal.

But we do get some strong stuff right off the bat. Prior to a group motorcycle run, somebody pulls out a canning jar of clear liquid that gets passed around. By the expressionless faces, you’d think it was water. Then you realize that you’re getting a mountain-culture lesson: That’s not water; that’s 190-proof moonshine—it can peel the paint off your car.

“Yeah, we shinin’,” says one of the bikers’ “old ladies.” And you see the remnants of Ozark Scots-Irish stoicism: No wincing whatsoever, even though every swig of the legendary firewater, by definition, scorches off a few esophageal tissue layers.

‘Run to the Wall’

This particular run is headed to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. It’s an annual, ritualistic gathering to pay tribute to Vietnam’s fallen, with candlelight vigils, old photos of lost comrades-in-arms, and the finding and tracing of names etched in the polished black stone.

It really amounts to a self-designated, thunderous honor guard, with at least one Harley chopper carrying the American, the MIA, and the U.S. Marine Corps flags all attached to the sissy bar. The understanding of the solace and sense of belonging—not to mention the earth-shattering power of 300,000 revved straight-pipe (unmuffled) engines, and uniforms of black leather, beards, and bandanas—is implicit. Because in these instances, all of the above are absolutely uniforms. Solemnity and tears abound.

The life of the American war-vet biker is one of often attending funerals and memorials for newly fallen armed forces personnel, as well as ritual acknowledgment of POWs and MIAs. There’s as much elaborate pomp and circumstance as can be mustered in little forlorn cemeteries out near freeways, or in Rotary Club basements. There’s much saluting, playing of “Taps,” occasional helicopter flyovers, and even one ritual POW enactment with a vet tied up in a bamboo tiger cage.

It’s understated in the film, but Hall still has nightmares from jungle warfare fought with the 4th Infantry Division nearly half a century ago. He thinks the entire war was a mistake now, and the spoils-of-war ear necklace he made in his fool youth weighs in extremis upon his soul. “It was all so unnecessary,” he says. However, he’s still outraged at the hostility and indifference that soldiers encountered when they returned from Vietnam.

About Face

Once the two handsome boys have been successfully brought from Mexico to Hall’s inner trailer park circle, we suddenly see this man, Stray Dog, through their eyes.

They’re touchingly old-school courteous and well-mannered; they politely try to resolve the culture shock of moving to rural Missouri from their far more cosmopolitan Mexico City lifestyle, and try to resolve, furthermore, their suddenly dashed expectations of a better life in the United States. “It’s all highways here,” says one of them on a phone call to Mexico.

No nightlife, just the occasional bonfire and attempts by neighbors to teach these shy boys to ride a Harley and shoot a deer rifle. Ain’t that America? It’s bleak. It’s painful to see America from the vantage point of these boys. He’d witnessed a young captive American soldier’s arms being macheted at the wrists.

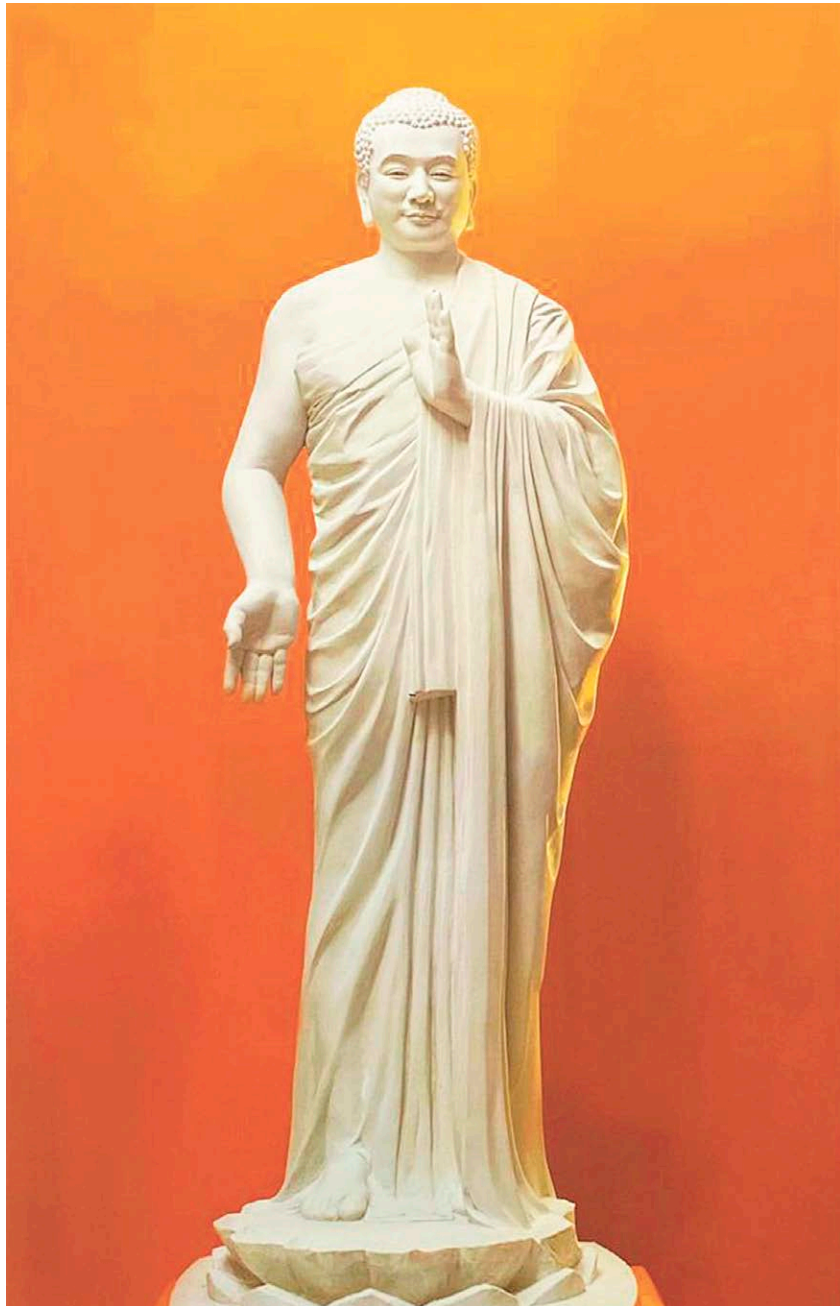
They do appreciate Hall’s bending over backward for them, and naturally, they’re grateful to him for taking good care of their mother. To great relief, director Granik related in the Q&A that the boys are now in college. This is a huge load off. That info was not in the film and should have been.

Wrap-Up

All in all, “Stray Dog” isn’t so much about the trauma of the past as it is about trying to make the present work. It’s about meeting people—Harley brothers, fellow vets, and sons of his wife. Hall meets ‘em all, and he is of continual, heartfelt service to those in need.

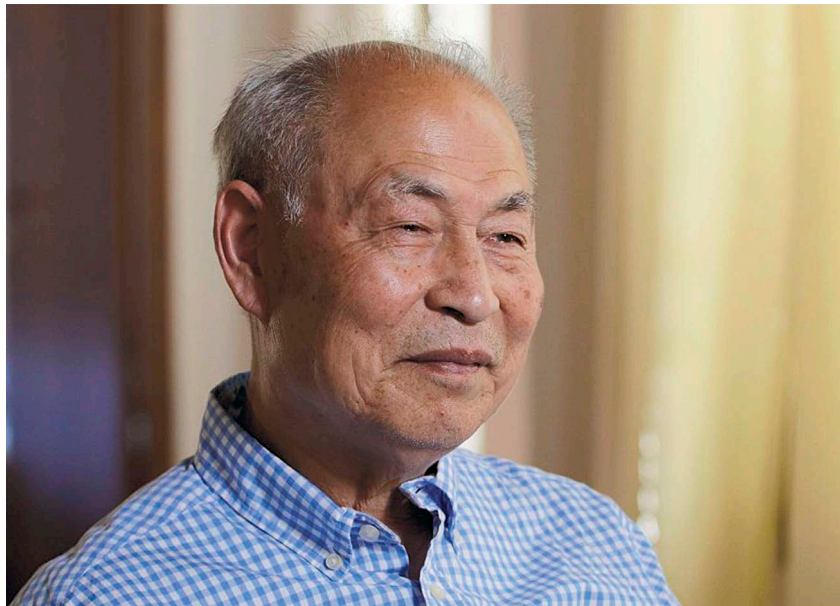
The film shows the deep human need to be sustained by ritual, and how, when our past bows us down with an unbearable weight, we can take our minds off it by doing good deeds for others and lessening our karmic loads.

It should be noted that the notorious one-percent gangs are slowly moving away from outlaw biker culture and doing more and more acts of service: rescuing dogs, bringing toys to terminally ill children in hospitals, and the like. Ron “Stray Dog” Hall: exemplary American citizen. Over and out.



"Buddha," 2002, by Zhang Kunlun.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF KACEY COX FROM "SACRED ART" UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED



Zhang Kunlun in an interview for the film "Sacred Art."

From Tortured Chinese Prisoner to International Art Leader

The story of Zhang Kunlun

MASHA SAVITZ

Professor Zhang Kunlun is one of China's most accomplished sculptors. As the recipient of many awards, Zhang was once the director of the Sculpture Institute of the Shandong Art Institute, as well as director of its Sculpture Research Institute. He also created some of China's largest monuments.

“Sculpture is an art of regrets. One always wants to do things perfectly. This Buddha statue has taken me a very long time. With previous statues, I made them quickly. This one is different.”

Zhang Kunlun, artist

Yet at the peak of his career, the renowned artist became a victim of the persecution of Falun Gong in China. The recognition and respect he received from Chinese officials ended abruptly when he stood up for his freedom of belief. Zhang was detained in China four times, beaten, and tortured for practicing the peaceful meditation practice. Just like that, the once renowned artist was treated like a criminal.

After imprisonment and severe torture, Zhang Kunlun now lives in the United States where he creates magnificent works

of art and curates the world's most toured group-art exhibition, "The Art of Zhen Shan Ren." The exhibition, which he launched in 2004, has since toured more than 50 countries with over 1,000 shows worldwide, from New York City to Paris, from Toronto to Milan. The intention of the exhibition is to expose one of the most tragic human rights violations of our times—the persecution of Falun Gong in China—while affirming the power of beauty in art.

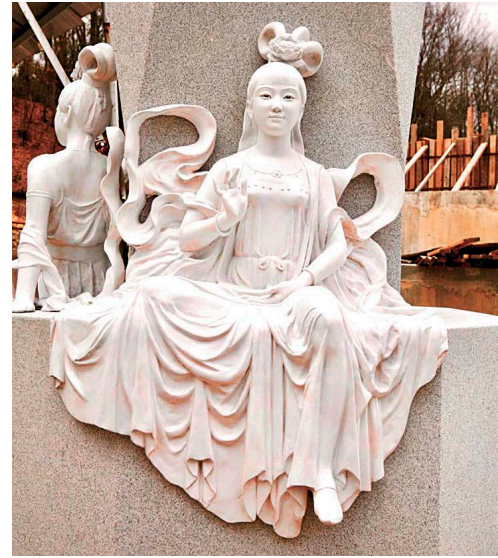
An Inspiration

Sculptor and New Masters Academy instructor Johanna Schwaiger, said by phone, that she had the privilege of working alongside Zhang during a short apprenticeship with him in 2003 at his workshop in upstate New York.

"The encounter with professor Zhang Kunlun was a big milestone in my journey as an artist. I was amazed by his mastery and the stoic patience he had going about his work. But the biggest impression he left



Zhang Kunlun's self-depiction, 2002, of a common torture method he endured in China.



A 3/4-life-size statue of a Bodhisattva, 2008, by Zhang Kunlun. Artificial stone and granite.

on me was his selflessness and lighthearted nature even after all he has been going through in detention in China.

"His spirit was not broken, quite the opposite. His mission is very clear, and his art is never about himself but honoring truth and beauty with the best he can do. He worked on several projects throughout the day, every one with a level of high mastery, but to one sculpture he gave extra attention—an over life-size sculpture of Buddha."

Zhang Kunlun's Story

Toronto-based filmmaker Kacey Cox has spent the last seven years following the exhibition in its journey across the world for his soon-to-be-released documentary "Sacred Art."

Cox documented a detailed and intimate



The "Zhen Shan Ren International Exhibition" opening in Florence, Italy, at the Aria Art Gallery in 2015.

interview with Zhang about his experience in Chinese detention and his mission in art, which he has graciously shared with New Masters Academy's online magazine Canvas.

"I was the director of the Sculpture Department at Shandong College of Arts," Zhang said. "In 1985, I built a 15-meter (about 50 feet) high statue at Xinglong Mine. In '86, I built a 30-meter (about 100 feet) high statue of the Tang Dynasty. It was the tallest statue in China at that time. I was at the peak of my career, yet I was not fulfilled. No matter how much money you have and how famous you are... these last for just a few decades. I was lacking meaning in my life."

In 1989 during his quest to find meaning in life and art, Zhang moved to Montreal, where he taught at the prestigious McGill University.

It wasn't until 1996 when he moved back to China to take care of his mother-in-law and learned about the meditation practice Falun Gong that he felt he'd become a new person.

"When I returned to China, upon getting off the plane, I saw that Falun Gong was spreading very rapidly. On almost every lawn and every square, people were peacefully practicing the Falun Gong meditation exercises... It was wonderful."

In 1999, the Chinese Communist Party began a smear campaign against Falun Gong. Millions of people lost their jobs; many were imprisoned, tortured, and even killed. Zhang goes on to explain:

"The CCP utilized all state-owned departments, newspapers, radio, and TV stations, even mobilizing the military and state police. The entire country was in terror. It was a large-scale manhunt."

"At that time, I wanted to make a 75-meter

(about 250 feet) high Buddha statue. But since I practiced Falun Gong, I was blacklisted and in danger at [every] moment. I too became a victim and got detained."

Zhang decided to write a letter to the Chinese government, explaining his belief that Falun Gong is beneficial to society. In July 2000, Zhang was taken into police custody. In a detention center, he was tortured with electric shock batons.

"You could smell the burning skin," he recalls. His legs and arms were badly burned, and his left leg was left so badly injured that he had difficulty walking for three months. "Their goal was to keep us from having even one minute to be able to think independently," Zhang says.

"I was monitored 24 hours a day by a group of [guards]. After endless brainwashing, deception, coercion, and psychological attacks, I almost collapsed. Such mental torture was even worse than physical torture. They transferred me to Wancun Forced Labor Camp. I prepared myself to possibly die there, because Wancun is notorious for persecuting practitioners to death. I didn't think I could survive."

"To my surprise, they used an entirely different approach. A deputy commissar said, 'We have an art teacher here. Can you teach some painting?' I said, 'I am not interested.' Then, he coerced me to sit there. He brought brushes, ink, and paper over and told me to paint. I made two strokes with the brush. He recorded it. They broadcasted this to the public, deceiving everyone. This hurt me the most. The mental devastation still continues today."

The coerced video demonstration was then taken by communist officials to falsely claim that he had renounced Falun Gong and had started working with the authorities. This propaganda was shown to Canadian officials who had pressured the Chinese government to release Zhang.

With the help of Amnesty International and the Canadian government, Zhang was released early from detention on Jan. 10, 2001, and returned home to Canada. There, his determination to defend freedom of belief in China became stronger than ever.

"[Today,] a large number of Falun Gong practitioners are in prisons. I have to speak on their behalf to stop the persecution. I couldn't just care about my own well-being. But how should I do this? Art is my profession. I can only do it through art."

"I was thinking, should I start an art exhibition? I couldn't get practitioners from China [to contribute art] because they were being persecuted, so I only looked for artists who were overseas. I made phone calls and sent emails. I started searching for them everywhere."

"At the time, we had gathered 15 artists together who all shared the same mission. When we began, we weren't sure what to do. Because I have experience in painting, in many cases, I made the composition, and others painted."

"The first exhibition was in 2004, at the capitol in Washington, D.C. My aim was to have governments around the world awaken to this issue and call for justice. During the exhibition, some members of Congress came to see it. They were almost in tears. They said that more people should see these paintings. That inspired us. So later we started exhibiting them around the world."

Besides creating and showing artwork depicting the persecution and its victims, Zhang continues to sculpt the Buddha.

Johanna Schwaiger recalled, "I remember being in awe seeing the over life-size sculpture masterfully crafted in his workshop. The large representation of Buddha was an otherworldly being, radiating pure compassion that made my eyes tear up."

“His spirit was not broken, quite the opposite. His mission is very clear, and his art is never about himself but honoring truth and beauty with the best he can do.”

Johanna Schwaiger, sculptor

Austrian Holocaust survivor, neurologist, and author Victor Frankl wrote that "what is to give light must endure burning." Zhang's ordeals and devotion have forged an artist whose light serves as a beacon of faith, endurance, justice, and beauty for us all.

To view the documentary "Sacred Art," visit SacredArtFilm.com

Masha Savitz is a journalist, author of "Fish Eyes for Pearls," painter, and filmmaker who wrote and directed the groundbreaking documentary "Red Reign."

This article, slightly edited, is reprinted with permission from Canvas: The Online Magazine for Artists by New Masters Academy.

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Heavenly Ascension: 'The Assumption of the Virgin'

ERIC BESS

Around 1475, Italian Renaissance artist Francesco Botticini created a large painting titled "The Assumption of the Virgin." The theme of the Virgin Mary ascending to heaven was common in Renaissance art.

In the lower third of the painting, we see the 12 apostles of Jesus. They stand next to an open casket on a hill that overlooks Florence, Italy. The casket contains not a body, but instead lilies—the flowers often associated with Mary's purity.

Dressed in red and kneeling in devotion to the left of the apostles is the poet and apothecary Matteo Palmieri. He is the patron who commissioned the painting for his funerary chapel. Kneeling to the right of the apostles is his wife, Niccolosa. During the Renaissance, patrons often had their likenesses depicted in divine scenes to show their own devotion and piety.

Above the earthly scene, Botticini has depicted the heavens opening up, where, at the top, sits Jesus. He holds a book that has the Greek symbols for "Alpha" and "Omega." Mary kneels at his feet to receive his blessing.

In the heavens, Botticini also includes the three orders of angels proposed by the Christian theologian and Neoplatonic philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite of the late fifth or early sixth century.

The 9 Levels and 3 Orders of Angels Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote the treatise "On the Heavenly Hierarchy." He suggests that every good thing comes down from God. While we humans struggle to know God directly, we can be led to know God indirectly through the appropriate symbols that make his mysteries intelligible to us.

These symbols can be shared with us by way of angels. There are three orders of an-

gels with three levels in each. The angels pass down those good things from God, with each group of angels below interpreting the message of the group above. One purpose of the hierarchy is to have humans assimilate, as much as possible, with God.

The first order of angels, that is, the highest order, contains the following types of angels: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. The second order contains Authorities, Lordships, and Powers. And the third order, which is the order closest to humans, contains Angels, Archangels, and Principalities.

Let's return to Botticini's painting to see how he depicted these angels. He divided them into three registers that correspond to the three orders. Let's start at the bottom register and ascend.

In the bottom register, he depicts Angels, Archangels, and Principalities. Principalities, shown with blue robes and black and red wings, are leaders of divine example. In white robes and with pink wings, Archangels are also leaders of the divine but communicate divine messages from above to the Angels.

Angels, depicted in pink robes and having orange and black wings, are the ones shown closest to the earth and are at the very bottom of the hierarchy. They are considered the heavenly beings who deliver God's messages to the world.

The Lordships, Powers, and Authorities are in the middle register. Depicted in white robes and with pink wings edged in black, the Lordships possess freedom in God, a freedom bound in goodness that is without subservience to anything that is not God.

Powers have blue robes and blue wings edged in red; they are courageous and unflinching for God. In black robes and with red wings edged in blue, Authorities give direction and provide order according to divine law.

The Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones



are the highest order and closest to God. Seraphim are depicted as babies' heads with red wings. They constantly move around God and, in their attempt to assimilate with God, elevate those things subordinate to them. They, without interruption, dance around and sing praises to God. Cherubim are depicted as babies' heads

with blue wings. They possess knowledge, wisdom, and the ability to contemplate the vision of God. Thrones are depicted as legless infants with blue wings. They are firm in God and are receptive to all that God gives.

Heavenly Ascension

What might this image mean for us today?

What type of wisdom might we extract from this work of art?

The angels at the bottom are the ones who communicate God's message to the world. They wear clothes and are depicted as human beings, but with wings. They are devoted to God, but their relationship to the world keeps them from a higher rank. Is it the case that the nature of our relationship to the world can distract us from ascending to heaven?

The angels at the top are shown as having a baby's head suggest the lack of influence the world has over them? Can we ascend in heaven if we suspend the desires of our bodies and spend more time singing the praises of and contemplating the vision of the divine?

Maybe the lilies in the casket are not only symbolic of Mary's purity but also indicative of the purity that results from the death of bodily desire, a death that results in heavenly ascension.

Either way, several things stand out to me about the orders of angels. One thing is that all three ranks are necessary. Each rank and each angel fulfills a duty, and the ones above give willingly to the ones below. This is a hierarchy based on loving, contemplating, and sharing understandings of the divine.

Secondly, differences are maintained even in heaven. There isn't one type of angel doing one type of thing, but there are multiple angels, each with different characteristics and different interpretations of divine wisdom.

Maybe this is one way that we often fail to accomplish divine will on earth. In heaven, it seems that different beings with different defining qualities and different understandings of the divine share their understandings to gain a deeper connection with the divine.

On earth, we often use our understandings of the divine as our own personal possessions to club others over the head



(Above) "The Assumption of the Virgin," circa 1475–1476 by Francesco Botticini. Tempera on wood; 90 inches by 148.5 inches. National Gallery of Art, London.

(Left top) Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones in a detail of "The Assumption of the Virgin," circa 1475–1476, by Francesco Botticini.

(Left bottom) Principalities, Archangels, and Angels in a detail of "The Assumption of the Virgin," circa 1475–1476, by Francesco Botticini.

with when they think differently than we do. We assume our own understanding is absolutely correct, and we push away and condemn people who think differently. Are we open to the type of growth that requires us to share, not force, divine understandings so that we too may ascend?

Art has an incredible ability to point to what can't be seen so that we may ask "What does this mean for me and for everyone who sees it?" "How has it influenced the past and how might it influence the future?" "What does it suggest about the human experience?" These are some of the questions I explore in my series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart."

Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

A Heartwarming Biopic About Togetherness Despite Differences

IAN KANE

As we head into 2021, forms of media that focus on the positive aspects of life are a good way to begin the new year—especially in light of all the divisiveness that has encapsulated 2020. In the cinematic realm, I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate unity and togetherness than watching the French film (through, yes, English subtitles) "The Intouchables."

Produced in 2011 and helmed by directors Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, the film is based on the unlikely, real-life friendship of Corsican French businessman Philippe Pozzo di Borgo and his caregiver, Abdel Sellou. In the movie, Mr. Borgo is known simply as Philippe (François Cluzet), and Sellou's name was changed to Driss (Omar Sy).

Philippe comes from inherited wealth, having been born into a noble family. Unfortunately, he suffered a horrible hang-gliding accident and, as a result, is a paraplegic. Philippe is interviewing applicants for a caretaker position at his palatial Parisian residence. There's a long line of prospective candidates for the position, but they all seem to answer questions as if they're saying things they want Philippe to hear, instead of being frank. Thus, they all end up sounding the same.

Suddenly, an impatient Senegalese man, Driss, bursts into the interview room. He's collecting signatures from prospective employers so that he can gain government financial benefits should he be turned down. He isn't a trained caretaker and doesn't know the first thing about dealing with people with special needs; all he wants is Philippe's signature.

But Driss is upfront about everything. His candid nature impresses Philippe, who tells him to return the following day to pick up the signed document.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY

When Driss shows up the next day to fetch the form, one of Philippe's assistants, Yvonne (Anne Le Ny), shows him around the opulent residence. She finally guides Driss into Philippe's bedroom and the latter hires him on the spot. Then, in an effort to preserve Driss's sense of honor (instead of making the job offer seem like a hand-out), he presents the position as a challenge: He tells Driss that he'll try him out as a caretaker for a month and warns him that none of the recent caretakers could make it past the two-week mark.

Driss accepts and starts to settle into his new lodgings' large, luxury quarters complete with a bathroom the size of most living rooms. However, he soon begins to realize just how challenging the position is. As an untrained caretaker, he learns his job on the fly—feeding, bathing, and performing other fundamental duties for his new boss.

This process results in several hilarious scenes, such as when Driss attempts to wash Philippe's hair and realizes that he's accidentally using foot cream instead of shampoo; or when Driss is feeding Philippe and almost puts a fork into his eye because of staring at Philippe's beautiful assistant, Magalie (Audrey

The film's message of shared humanity, friendship, and unity offers a great way to begin the new year.

Fleuret), as she walks by.

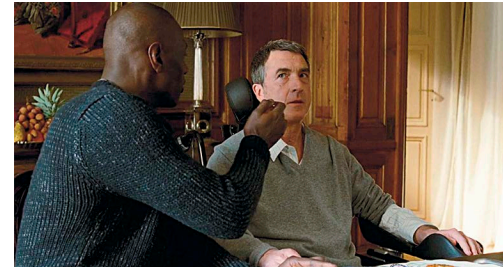
But beyond Driss's day-to-day care of Philippe, and despite being from seemingly opposite sides of the socioeconomic spectrum, the two men begin to develop a special friendship. Driss's infectious optimism and exuberance (in the face of growing up in crushing poverty) begins to rub off on Philippe, and soon the two are cracking crude jokes with one another and talking about their disparate pasts.

The film deftly switches back and forth between comedic and dramatic beats. For instance, during a touching scene in which Philippe and Driss are dining at a restaurant together, Philippe reveals that the love of his life was a woman named Alice who passed away due to a terminal illness. Driss watches as Philippe gloomily reminisces about the tragic circumstances, but suddenly he uses a few moments with a waiter to comic effect, which lifts Philippe's spirits.

Unlike some of the more clichéd Hollywood films that depict similar subject matter, this one avoids the usual pitfalls of inauthenticity and oversentimentality. This is due in no small part to the outstanding performances by the two leads, Cluzet and Sy, whose chemistry seems earnest and natural. The way that they develop rapport is gradual, and both actors emote in such believable ways that they practically disappear into their characters.

As the saying goes, "there's nothing new under the sun." But the way a tale is told can still be unique. So is the case with "The Intouchables," a heartwarming cinematic experience that carries with it a message of shared humanity, friendship, and unity, and offers a great way to begin the new year.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To learn more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com



(Top) Philippe (François Cluzet) and Driss (Omar Sy) bond despite their differences, in "The Intouchables."

(Above) Driss (Omar Sy) must learn to care for paraplegic Philippe (François Cluzet).

'The Intouchables'

Director
Olivier Nakache, Éric Toledano

Starring
François Cluzet, Omar Sy, Anne Le Ny

Running Time
1 hour, 52 minutes

Rated
R

Release Date
Nov. 2, 2011 (France)

★★★★★



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