

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Peering into the vastness of the world can induce a wondrous awe. "Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog, circa 1817, by Caspar David Friedrich. Hamburger Kunsthalle.

POETRY

Milton and the Sublime *Part 1*

Preparing for 'Paradise Lost'

Sublimity emerges when goodness, truth, and beauty all simultaneously arise within a work.

JAMES SALE

Sublimity is a word rather like "mystical" in that it is difficult to define exactly what it is, but most of us have had some experience of it. Indeed, when we do experience it, and if we are not emotionally dead, it leaves an indelible impression, for it is an experience, like love, that once we have had, we crave again and again.

However, as with the word "mystical," we now find in our contemporary society that the concept of sublimity is confined to arcane backwaters—perhaps scholars writing some academic paper may refer to it, but it is certainly not a concept current in popular culture.

Does anyone nowadays read—or write—poetry for its sublime content or form? (I am focusing on poetry here, but it can arise in other art forms, writings, and nature itself.) In a previous article for *The Epoch Times*, I

talked about sublimity emerging when goodness, truth, and beauty all simultaneously arise within a work, with more or less equal strength. When that happens, we experience sublimity not so much consciously—at least while it is happening—because the conscious faculty is overwhelmed; we are in a state of astonishment or awe.

Longinus, in the famous essay conventionally attributed to him, "On the Sublime," put it this way (in H.L. Havell's translation): "The Sublime lifts him [the reader or observer] near to the great spirit of the Deity" and "adding word to word, until it has raised a majestic and harmonious structure—can we wonder if all this enchants us, wherever we meet with it, and filling us with the sense of pomp and dignity and sublimity, and whatever else it embraces, gains a complete mastery over our minds?"

Continued on Page 4

2021 NTD 9TH
INTERNATIONAL CLASSICAL
CHINESE DANCE COMPETITION

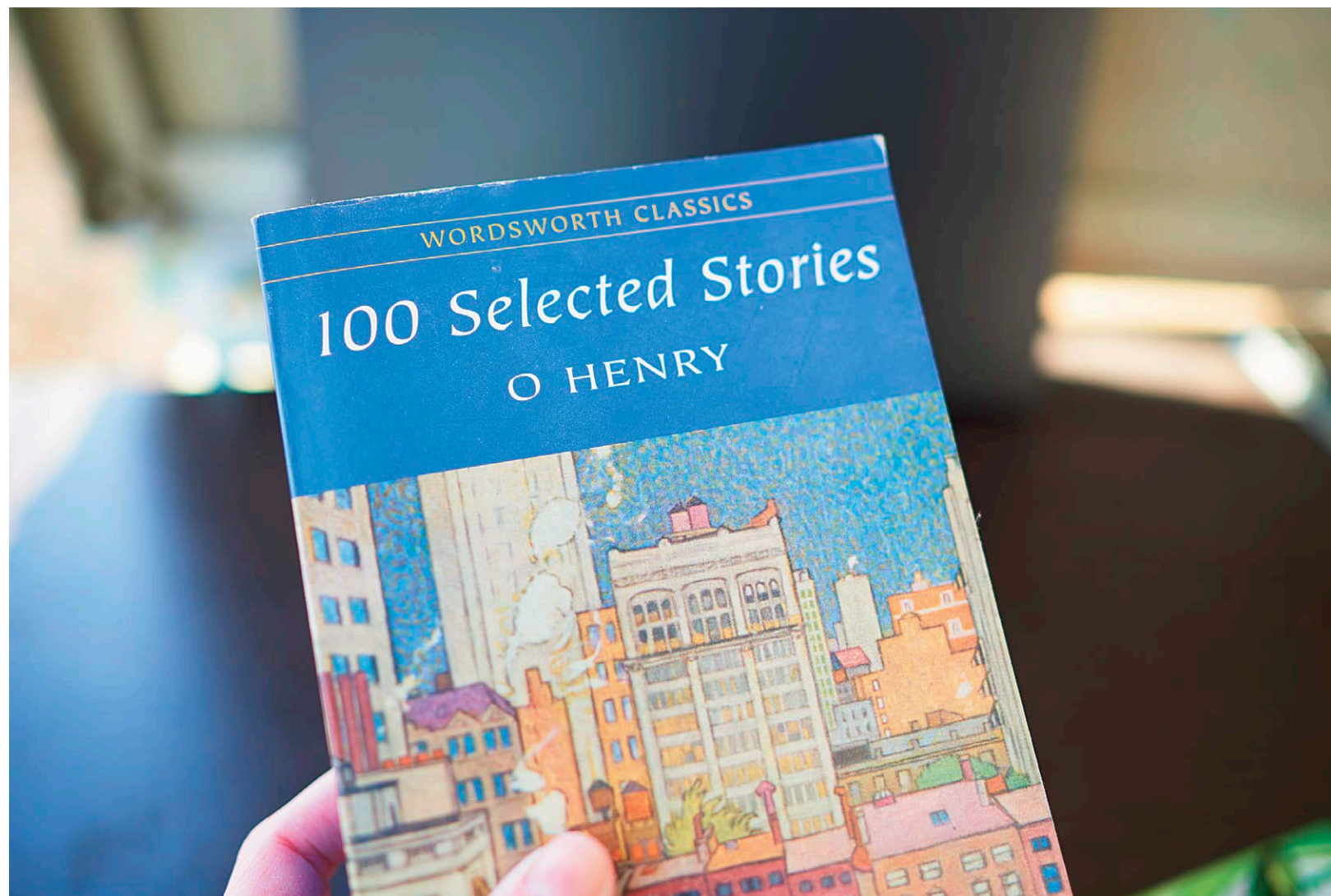


PRELIMINARY | SEMI-FINAL | FINAL
Sept. 2-3 | Sept. 4 | Sept. 5

Gold Award \$10,000

SEMI-FINAL & FINAL Tickets on Sale \$30
Hotline 1-888-477-9228

Tribeca Performing Arts Center
199 Chambers Street New York, NY 10007
DANCE.NTDTV.COM



LITERATURE

Gifts From a Master: The Stories of William Sydney Porter

JEFF MINICK

“One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one’s cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.”

So begins O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” one of the sweetest, most concise, and best-written short stories in the English language. Della wants to buy a watch chain for her 22-year-old husband, Jim Young, but has no money. What she does have is a cascade of hair that might have, as O. Henry tells us, depreciated the Queen of Sheba’s jewels and gifts. She sells her hair, buys Jim a beautiful chain for his watch, and presents him with her gift, once he recovers from the shock of her missing tresses.

Della opens her present from Jim first, and finds “the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window.” She gives way to “hysterical tears and wails,” but then recovers and proudly presents Jim with his watch chain. Jim sits on the couch, hands behind his head, and smiles, saying: “Della, let’s put our Christmas presents away and keep ‘em a while. They’re too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on.”

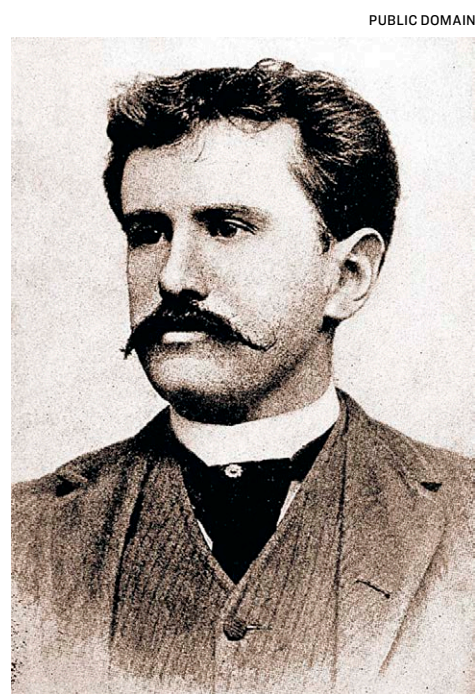
In the last paragraph of the story, O. Henry credits the magi with inventing “the art of giving Christmas presents.” But then he returns to Della and Jim, writing: “In a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”

Today, O. Henry is buried in Riverside Cemetery in Asheville, North Carolina, where visitors to the gravesite often leave \$1.87 in change on his tombstone.

A Life in Brief

During his short life, William Sydney Porter (1862–1910) composed more than 400 short stories, plus various journalistic commentaries and pieces. Born in Greensboro, North Carolina, he later became a pharmacist, a journalist, and a bank clerk.

That last position landed him in a world of trouble. Accused of embezzlement,



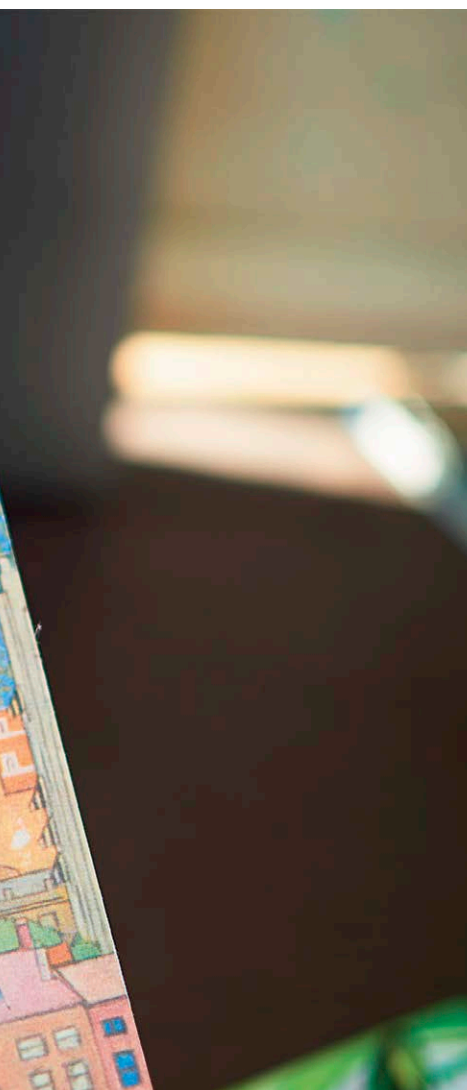
William Sydney Porter in his 30s. From “Analyzing Character,” 1922, by Katherine M.H. Blackford and Arthur Newcomb.

Porter fled to Honduras to escape prosecution. While there, he learned that his wife, 17 years old when they married, was dying of consumption, and he re-entered the United States to face both prison and his wife’s death. Convicted of the charges against him, Porter spent three years in prison, wrote stories while behind bars, and emerged to become one of America’s preeminent writers. He later married a fellow North Carolinian, produced his many stories while living in New York City, and eventually died at an early age from alcoholism.

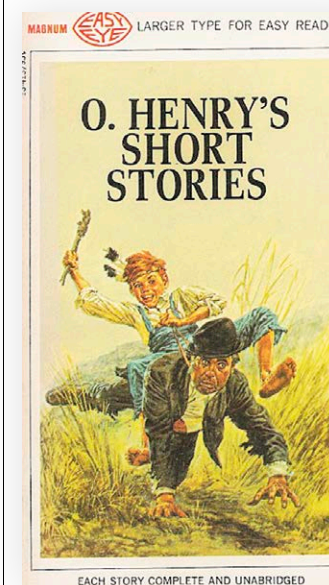
Despite the sniping and carping of various literary critics, Porter, better known by his pen name O. Henry, became widely popular with the readers of his time.

Henry’s Trademark

Like “The Gift of the Magi,” many of O. Henry’s stories come with a surprise ending. “After Twenty Years,” for instance, features a policeman on his nighttime beat who encounters Bob, who is waiting to meet a friend, Jimmy Wells, an arrangement made 20 years earlier. After an amiable chat, the policeman moves on. Soon another man arrives, who at first claims to be Jimmy but turns out to be a plainclothes cop who places Bob under arrest. He hands him a note from the real Jimmy, the first policeman who, unlike Bob, recognizes his friend and connects him with a wanted poster in the station house. Regarding Bob’s arrest, Jimmy writes: “Somehow I couldn’t do it myself, so



William Sydney Porter, better known by his pen name O. Henry, was famous for his heartfelt and humorous stories.



A copy of O. Henry’s stories with an illustration of “The Ransom of Red Chief” on the cover.

William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) composed more than 400 short stories.

next morning he’s sentenced to three months in prison.

These twists and unexpected turns in the stories even today make O. Henry unique among American writers.

Regular People, Good Hearts

Another hallmark of an O. Henry story are the characters: tramps like Soapy, thieves, cops, shop girls, bohemian artists, and others whom O. Henry saw daily in the hotel lobbies and streets of New York. Some contemporaries like Edith Wharton found their characters and situations in the city’s drawing rooms, but O. Henry based his characters on ordinary citizens.

And often he endowed these men and women with remarkable tenderness. Here is part of his description of Old Behrman, a painter in “The Last Leaf,” living in a building with younger artists, and who has long claimed he will one day paint a masterpiece:

“He drank gin to excess, and still talked of his coming masterpiece. For the rest he was a fierce little old man, who scoffed terribly at softness in any one, and who regarded himself as special mastiff-in-waiting to protect the two young artists in the studio above.”

Yet it is the fierce, hard Behrman whose “masterpiece”—the painting of a leaf on a wall—saves the life of a young woman.

Humor

Some readers may object to “The Ransom of Red Chief” as inappropriate because of the story’s subject matter. It features the kidnapping of a boy by two con men. But once we put aside that reservation, we find ourselves in the middle of a hilarious adventure.

Bill and Sam kidnap the son of a prominent citizen in a small town in Alabama and take him to a nearby cave while they wait for his ransom. The boy then turns their lives into a sort of living hell. Calling himself Red Chief, he tries to scalp Bill, threatens to burn Sam at a stake at sunrise, rides Bill like a horse for hours at a time, knocks him out with a rock from his sling, and commits a variety of other minor atrocities.

By the end of “The Ransom of Red Chief,” the kidnapers have returned

the boy to his father, though not under the conditions they expected.

If you haven’t read this classic and if you’re looking for some laughter, give “The Ransom of Red Chief” a shot.

Pleasures

There are many excellent reasons for paying a visit to O. Henry, particularly after the hardships of the last tumultuous months. In his work, we find wise insights into human nature, a look at an earlier America, some wonderful writing, and stories filled with hope rather than despair.

Best of all, we can enjoy some good old-fashioned fun.

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. 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.

A few of O. Henry’s stories were compiled in the 1952 movie “O. Henry’s Full House.” Jeanne Crain and Farley Granger star in “The Gift of the Magi,” perhaps his best-known work.



What People Are Saying



I read The Epoch Times daily. I still like hard papers [...] and I still like to grab that paper in my hand, but I get more printed versions of stories than ever before. You guys have done an amazing job, and really—I think there’s such a void in media, especially newspapers. They slant so solidly one way that there are very few papers that I can really feel that I can rely on, and The Epoch Times is one.

SEAN HANNITY
Talk show host



I congratulate you and The Epoch Times for the work you are doing, especially with regard to keeping the menace of the communist threat in front of us.

DR. SEBASTIAN GORKA
Military and intelligence analyst and former deputy assistant to the president



I rely on The Epoch Times newspaper for factual and unbiased news coverage.

LARRY ELDER
Best-selling author, attorney, and talk show host



The Epoch Times is a great place where you can understand traditional values in a way and in a tone and through content that is accessible. It’s smart.

CARRIE SHEFFIELD
Columnist and broadcaster



It’s our favorite paper. It’s the first one we read. Thank you so much for your reporting of the news.

PAUL GOSAR
U.S. representative for Arizona

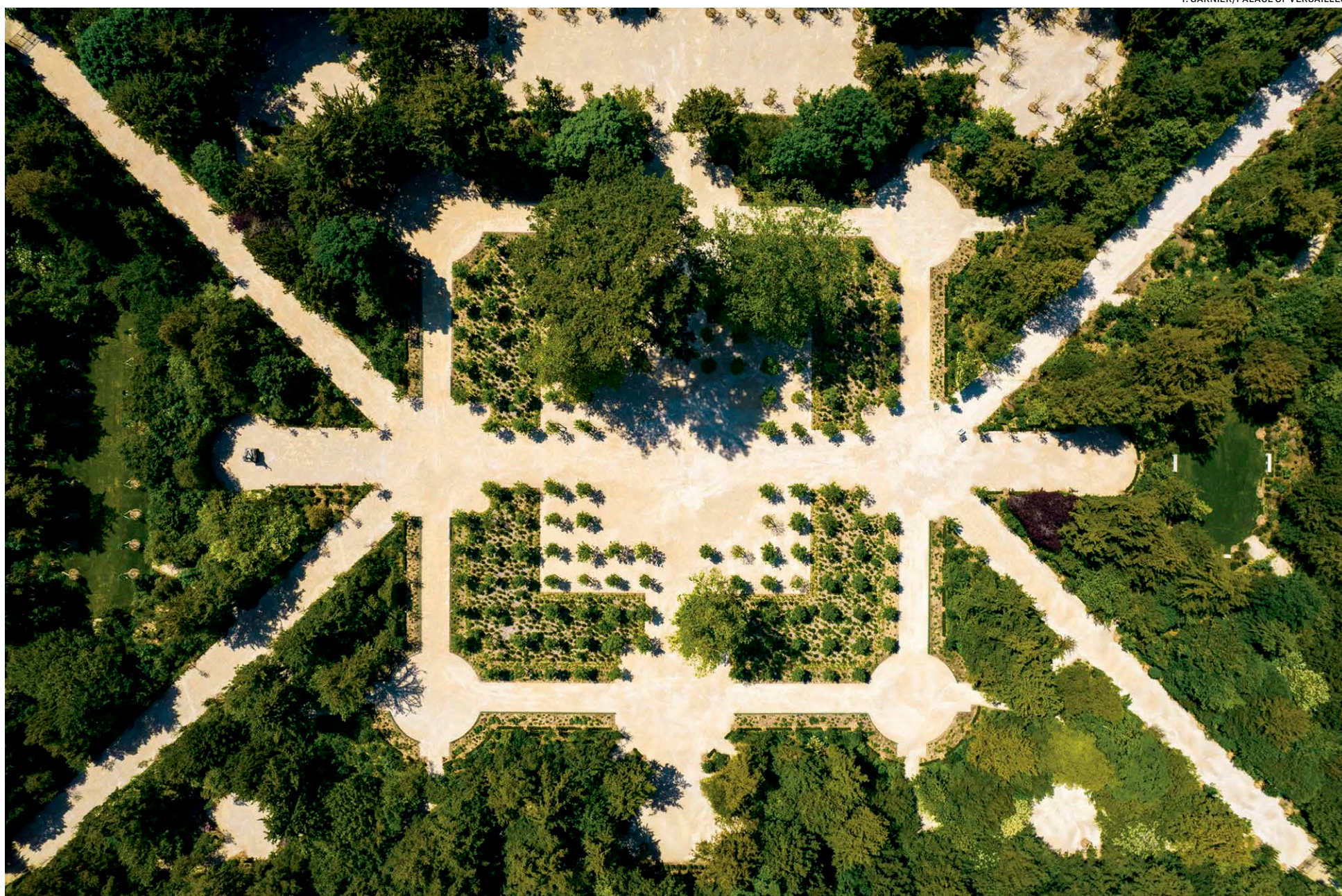


Original artworks, canvas wraps, art posters, and framed prints of Award-winning oil paintings now available for purchase at

InspiredOriginal.Org

INSPIRED
ORIGINAL

Learn more at EpochSubscription.com
THE EPOCH TIMES
TRUTH AND TRADITION



The newly restored Queen's Grove at the Palace of Versailles. Many nonnative plants, including a large contingent of North American native species that were introduced to France in the 18th century, have been replanted.

BLOOMING AGAIN

Marie Antoinette's Private Garden Is Restored at the Palace of Versailles

LORRAINE FERRIER

At a certain time of year, American visitors ambling around the grounds of the Palace of Versailles can detect the familiar heady scent of the Virginia tulip tree—Marie Antoinette's favorite tree.

Native to eastern and southern America, the Virginia tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), with its pale green or cheerful bright yellow cup-shaped blooms, along with other American native plant species such as the white fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), was first introduced to France in the 18th century.

Now, nearly 150 newly planted Virginia tulip trees are the centerpiece of the recently restored Queen's Grove at Versailles.

The restoration project took two years and included extensive research in order to return the grove to the layout of Marie Antoinette's time.

Along with the scent of the tulip tree, the sweet fragrance of 600 newly planted rose bushes, when they bloom, will greet visitors. The roses pay homage to Marie Antoinette's world-famous rose collection and her love of the flower's beauty, perfume, and medicinal properties.

And wooded borders guide grove visitors to rest under the arbors of Judas trees (*Cercis siliquastrum*), staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*), Virginia chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), and Japanese cherry-blossom trees (*Prunus serrulata*).

Great Garden Design

Landscape architect and gardener André Le Nôtre originally created the famous gardens at Versailles for the Sun King, Louis XIV, in the 17th century. Part of Le Nôtre's design was a series of 15 groves, areas edged with trees, hedges, and trellises that appeared as elegant individual rooms adorned with vases, statues, and fountains.

A stupendous Labyrinth grove once stood



The famous Belgian botanical artist Pierre-Joseph Redouté tutored Marie Antoinette in art. *Rosa centifolia foliacea* commonly known as the Provence or Cabbage Rose, 1824, by Pierre-Joseph Redouté. Hand-colored stipple engraving.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

on the spot where the Queen's Grove now stands. Author Charles Perrault suggested to Louis XIV that 39 fountains, each showing an Aesop fable, should be placed in the Labyrinth as a tool to educate his son, the Dauphin. No expense was spared on the project. Artists created 39 painted lead fountains that included the animals of Aesop's fables with water spurting from their mouths as if they themselves spoke. Poet Isaac de Benserade wrote a caption and quatrain beside each fountain.

Adults and children marveled, in equal measure, at the elaborate enchanting automatons. The Labyrinth grove proved so popular that Perrault published an illustrated guidebook called "Labyrinthe de Versailles."

The Queen's Grove

Nearly a century later, between 1775 and 1776, King Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette's husband, had the Labyrinth grove destroyed because of the expense needed to

maintain the project. The replanted grove became the Queen's Grove.

In Marie Antoinette's time, the Queen's Grove was a French formal garden with a series of English-style gates and meandering pathways that were in vogue at the time.

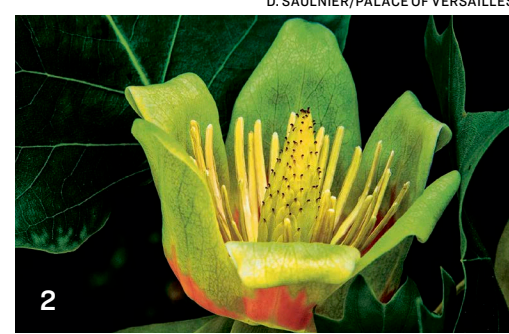
In contrast to Versailles's open parterre (the formal gardens with flowerbeds separated by gravel pathways), the grove gave the queen some privacy. This is where she could spend time away from prying eyes.

Louis XVI once declared to Marie Antoinette, "To you who love flowers so, I present this bouquet," as he gifted her the Petit Trianon, a château in the gardens of Versailles. The caretakers of the Palace of Versailles have ensured that all those who love flowers are able to enjoy the bouquet that is the Queen's Grove for many years to come.

To find out more about the newly restored Queen's Grove at the Palace of Versailles, visit ChateauVersailles.fr



T. GARNIER/PALACE OF VERSAILLES



D. SAULNIER/PALACE OF VERSAILLES



D. SAULNIER/PALACE OF VERSAILLES

1. The 15 groves that 17th-century landscape architect André Le Nôtre designed were private shaded spaces enclosed by trees, hedges, or trellises. Each grove had a distinct theme designed to delight and surprise visitors.

2. At the heart of the Queen's Grove was the Virginia tulip tree, purported to have been Marie Antoinette's favorite tree. Now, 150 tulip trees grace the center of the restored Queen's Grove.

3. The white fringetree is one of the American native species found in the Queen's Grove at the Palace of Versailles.

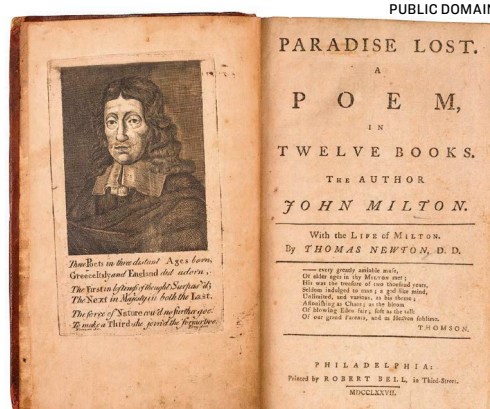


Marie Antoinette was an avid and renowned collector of roses. Now, 600 new rose bushes have replenished the Queen's Grove at the Palace of Versailles.

POETRY

Milton and the Sublime Part 1

Preparing for 'Paradise Lost'



"Paradise Lost: A Poem, in Twelve Books," first published in 1667, by John Milton. The first American edition, 1777, with the life of Milton by Thomas Newton, D.D. Morgan Library.

Continued from Page 1

A "complete mastery over our minds": We enter a state of total absorption, and for a while—for the duration of the reading or performance—we are lost to ourselves.

In fact, Longinus goes even further when he says: "When we survey the whole circle of life, and see it abounding everywhere in what is elegant, grand, and beautiful, we learn at once what is the true end of man's being ... To sum the whole: Whatever is useful or needful lies easily within man's reach; but he keeps his homage for what is astounding."

Yes, we admire goodness when we see it, we prefer truth when we detect it, and the beautiful is always welcome. These are useful and needful things for humanity to have. Society depends on them. But our homage, our reverence, the deep interests of our hearts—of our souls—is for the sublime when we are "astounded."

Thus it is that we should and must treasure all works of sublimity because they are the highest forms of art that we can experience. They are the greatest forms of expression, in fact. So we need to discuss sublimity and point out why certain works or passages are genuinely sublime, and seek to understand the underlying ideas that make them so—for they are worthy of emulation.

Of course, if works are worthy of emulation, we can revisit what their values are

and begin to understand what we might be able to aspire to, as people and as a society.

Keats Meets the Sublime

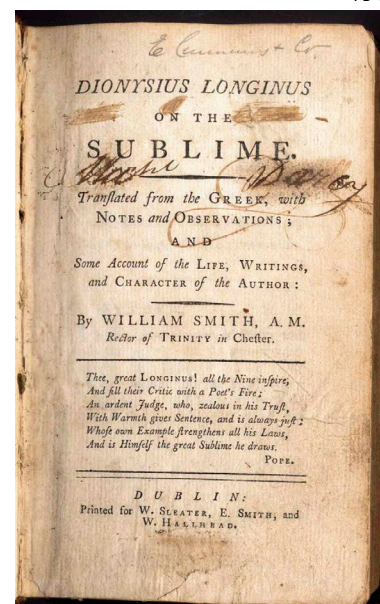
Before discussing Milton's "Paradise Lost," the most sublime poem in the English language barring none, I'd like to point out categorically that sublimity can occur in small passages, and even in one line where the context supports it. But I must introduce one small caveat first.

Longinus provides five criteria for establishing the sublime, but he prefaces them with this: "assuming, of course, the preliminary gift on which all these five sources depend, namely, command of language." The command of language is critical, as we will see with Milton and other poets who rise to this level.

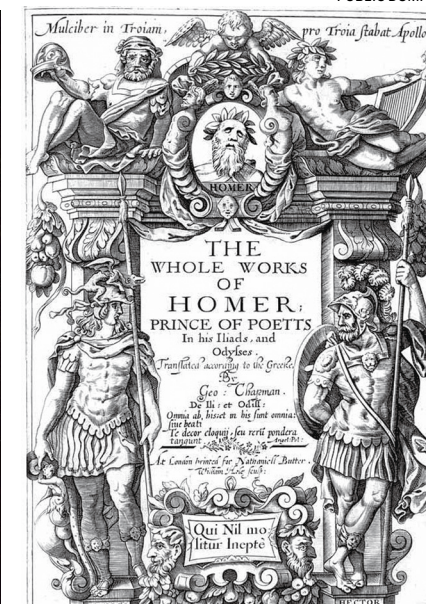
If we now come to "Paradise Lost," which I'd like to because it is the supreme example of sublimity in the poetry of the English language, we need to keep in mind a couple of comments that the great critic Dr. Samuel Johnson made about the poem. First, in his estimation, Milton's "work is not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first." In other words, this poem stands just a notch below Homer.

Secondly, "what other author ever soared so high or sustained his flight so long?" And here we have the essence of sublimity: the soaring so high and for so long. It's the sustained performance that is so impressive,

Our homage, our reverence, the deep interests of our hearts—of our souls—is, for the sublime, when we are 'astounded.'



PD-US



PUBLIC DOMAIN

and this of course depends on the elevation of language.

Let us look at a much briefer example of the sublime in action. Consider Keats's famous sonnet:

On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and Kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

(Left) The title page of an old edition of "On the Sublime," attributed to Longinus.

(Right) Artwork for George Chapman's translation of Homer, which captivated poet John Keats.

That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

In particular here, the last line of Keats's poem is sublime. The experience of read-

ing a translation of Homer by Chapman becomes—as the poet imaginatively searches for "the" astonishing image—like Cortez and his men first seeing the Pacific Ocean: "Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

As one reaches that last line, no matter how many times one reads it, one is continually amazed by it: The juxtaposition of reading a book and seeing a whole new ocean for the first time? Incongruous? No, sublime; the silence of sublimity where the conscious mind is subdued—quieted—and only the scale and magnitude of the unconscious becomes apparent in a living ocean that the eyes of the soul scrutinize in awe! But it's only one line, and 13 lines (14 if we include the title) to build it up. Notice, though, that the poem begins with reading a book and then progresses to standing on a "peak," before contemplating the vast ocean in front of it.

And what is a "book"? It is a compilation of words, lots of words, and in this case—Homer's—words of genius. Yet the effect is to transport us to a place of almost infinite wonder and total silence. Note here, too, that the ocean viewed is the Pacific: "pacifying," in other words.

In a way, it is like a beatific vision: Words fade and a deeper reality permeates the consciousness. This is one aspect of the sublime in action.

We can represent Keats's structure toward sublimity diagrammatically.

We start with the very small, seemingly inconsequential (a book), and the ego or intellect climbs to understand and embrace it. But the furthest reach of the intellect can only achieve the height of the mountain peak of Darien. At that point, comprehension fails as the limitless ocean floods the vision and one is overwhelmed.

The intellect seems high and seems big, but compared with the oceanic vision, it is entirely inconsequential. But note here that what overwhelms the mind, the ego, is the created order that the Pacific Ocean symbolizes. In other words, it is something good (because of its benefits), true (because of its reality), and beautiful (because of its scale).

Keats, being a truly great poet, is able to create the sublime in a sonnet by ordering his words and images in this way. But we can see exactly this same pattern reproduced on a massive scale in Milton's "Paradise Lost," and this will be the topic of Part 2 of this series.

James Sale has had over 50 books published, most recently, "Mapping Motivation for Top Performing Teams" (Routledge, 2021). He won first prize in The Society of Classical Poets 2017 annual competition, performing in New York in 2019. His most recent poetry collection is "HellWard." For more information about the author, and about his Dante project, visit TheWiderCircle.webs.com

THEATER

In Praise of Community Theater

MICHAEL KUREK

I live in the greater Nashville, Tennessee, area with a population of around 1.3 million, and home to over 50 community theaters. I do not mean movie theaters or music venues or school shows, but independent theaters with a stage where live actors put on musicals and plays ranging from Shakespeare to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Over the past decade, being married to an active theatrical performer, I have been to many of these theaters multiple times and feel qualified to generalize just a bit about them.

They are typically smallish, seating only about 100 to 150 people, which creates a wonderfully intimate experience. Nashville, nicknamed "Music City USA," has an abundance of talent, so most of the shows are well-acted and sung, in spite of often modest facilities, in shopping malls, former churches, or senior centers.

Typically, these shows have volunteer casts, or the principal actors are paid only a token fee for their labor of love. You may be surprised to discover that your robust insurance agent played Curly in "Oklahoma" in college, has a marvelous singing voice, and is about to reprise that role at the theater in your neighborhood. Your personal dental hygienist might be playing Audrey in "Little Shop of Horrors." Your neighbor's supertalented kids might be playing Jane and Michael Banks in "Mary Poppins."

The typical casts really do earn the name "community," because they include people from all ages and walks of life. Those playing the lead roles often have earned degrees in theater or music, though they may have another day job now. There are devoted older amateurs, who have acted in many shows, and rising stars who might be high-school seniors aspiring to major in theater in college. By the end of six weeks' rehearsal and then the show's three- or four-weekend run, this disparate bunch of people often grows very close. One often hears them refer to themselves as a kind of family. Collectively, and when all their own family members are in the audience for moral support, they are nothing less than a cultural institution that can be a vital part of each neighborhood or suburban community.

Community theater can be listed among the last bastions of traditional American culture, along with sports teams, marching bands, and houses of worship. This is not only because it provides a sense of community that is waning in many places but also because it is one of the few places where many people experience, often for the first time, great American music from yesteryear in shows like "The Sound of Music" and "My Fair Lady."

Some of their shows are covered by community newspapers, but they generally have a low visibility in the media. I have come to believe that these theaters are great treasures that deserve local patronage and support, not to mention that the ticket prices are modest, usually around \$15 (\$12 for students and seniors), the theaters are easy to get to, and shows are performed well enough to be a great source of enjoyment for their audiences.

How a Show Is Created

Recently, having tried my own hand at writing a show, I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand every phase of the process of putting on a show in one



COURTESY OF CRYSTAL KUREK

(Above) The quality of performances—set, lighting, and special effects—can be excellent at the community theater level. Crystal Kurek as the titular character in "Mary Poppins" at the Springhouse Theater in Smyrna, Tenn.

(Right) Young performers often get their starts in community theater. "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" at the Hendersonville Performing Arts Company, in Hendersonville, Tenn.



COURTESY OF CRYSTAL KUREK

of our local theaters, and I have found it fascinating and learned a great deal. The first rehearsal is typically a "table reading," where the whole cast sits around long tables with their copies of the script and simply reads aloud through the whole show, minus songs, to get a feel for the entire story and their parts in it.

At the next week or two of rehearsals, usually around four nights a week, the director sits down with the actors in groups of two or three who play scenes together to discuss their characterization, accents, motivations, and emotions. Then it is primarily the actors' job to determine how best to manifest that in delivering their lines and in their body language, as they practice at home.

Meanwhile, in another room or onstage, the music director is working with the rest of the cast on musical numbers. The first thing is to play through each vocal part, especially when people have to sing harmony, while the actors hold up their cell phones in the air to record their own parts, to be practiced at home. Then they sing through the songs together and get coaching, perhaps on notes that they sang out of tune or on diction that needs to be clearer, or even on singing with a British accent.

Then there are "blocking" rehearsals, when the director tells the actors where to stand on the stage, where to walk during a certain line, and when to stand or sit. Often they are told to "cheat out," which is to face the audience when speaking a line rather than the actor they are speaking to, so people can see their facial expressions. All of this blocking must be memorized and done precisely, so the actors pencil in notes next to those lines in their scripts. Blocking also includes things like certain actors quickly carrying chairs and other set pieces on and off the stage during the blackouts between scenes, using glow-in-the-dark tape on the floor to know exactly where to place them.

One of the most impressive parts of the rehearsal process are those for choreography. My show has several big dance numbers involving several actors, who also must simultaneously sing. The choreographer goes

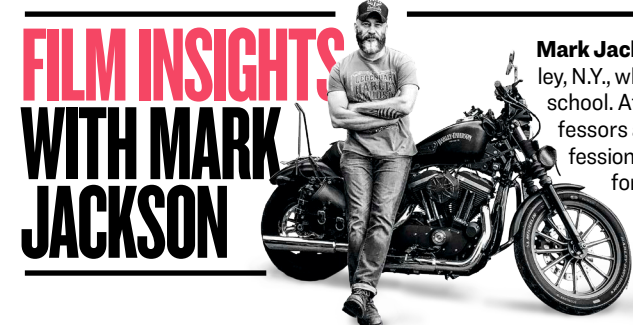
through each predetermined dance routine, personally demonstrating the moves and describing them with terms from ballet and other styles—terms like plié, tap, and glide—which all of these actors seemed to know and could pick up after being shown only once or twice, to my amazement. I came to learn that many of them took dance classes for years while growing up. Others have learned these skills in the course of doing 30 or more local shows.

Finally come run-throughs of the full show, but still "on book," meaning carrying your script around to refer to as needed; then by a week later comes the dreaded "off book" deadline. During the final week, called "tech week" (or "hell week"), the actors are finally off book and in costume with sets and props and wearing their little wireless head microphones. While up to now they have been rehearsing with just a piano playing, in the last few days (called "Sitzprobe") the full group of musicians is there playing.

At the same time, the lighting designer is programming the spotlights and stage lighting for each scene, and the sound designer is configuring the turning on and off of microphones for actors entering and leaving the stage, and all the volume levels.

I was amazed how so many elements came together so quickly to create an almost perfectly executed opening night. And only one week after my show closes, my wife will start the process all over again, rehearsing the role, as the song title calls her, of "Marian the Librarian" in "The Music Man" at another theater, while I get to go back to my regular job as a classical composer.

American composer Michael Kurek is the composer of the Billboard No. 1 classical album "The Sea Knows." The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit MichaelKurek.com



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.

'F9: The Fast Saga'

Director
Justin Lin

Starring
Vin Diesel,
Michelle Rodriguez,
Jordana Brewster,
Tyrese Gibson, Ludacris,
Charlize Theron, John Cena

Rated
PG-13

Running Time
2 hours, 25 minutes

Release Date
June 25, 2021

Rated

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Dumbing Down Audiences Fast

MARK JACKSON

Remember the summer blockbuster? That bonafide, rock-your-world, super-fun rollercoaster ride that everybody buzzed about for an entire summer? Like "Jaws," "Jurassic Park," "Star Wars," "Back to the Future," "Raiders of the Lost Ark," and "Top Gun"? How far our hallowed American summer blockbuster has fallen.

There are now nine installments in the "Fast & Furious" franchise. It's safe to say that a fair number of Americans have seen at least one of these muscle car movies. Most are fun if you like resto-mod cars and large groups of women clad in Brazilian beach couture, and Vin Diesel's character Dominic Toretto doing more or less criminal things while preaching the gospel of "family first."

The series began in 2001 with "The Fast and the Furious," and the original premise—about illegal street racing—was at least somewhat grounded in reality, if not exactly role-model material. Now, it's become like Bruce Banner going radioactive and turning into the Hulk. All the F & Fs are at least mildly ridiculous, but "F9: The Fast Saga," in addition to being just outlandishly stupid, even by this franchise's standards, is the latest in Hollywood's priming of America for communism. What? I know what you're thinking—that's a pretty high falutin'-sounding concept for a movie review, right? Well, this is a big theory that I have. More on that later.

Action films have long since reached the limit and have now plunged headlong into absurdity. That's detrimental.

New Stuff

The problem with making such intensely outrageous action movies and trying constantly to up the ante is that it all just becomes completely cartoonish. By the time Dom and wife Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) jump a canyon in a car, snag a vine (with a wheel) like car-Tarzan, and monkey-swing to the other side, and by the time Roman (Tyrese Gibson) and Tej (Chris "Ludacris" Bridges) make a small space shuttle out of a Pontiac Fiero and take off into outer space in yellow minion-looking spacesuits, I knew the lack-of-coffee headache I had would not be improving any time soon. This is a two-and-a-half-hour movie.

In addition to new action and new gizmos, there's a new character to spice up the action: Jakob Toretto (former wrestler John Cena). He's Dom's brother, an individual with oversized biceps and supernatural driving abilities in his own right. He's also sort of a James Bond superspy, whose job in this movie is to get hold of a MacGuffin that can manipulate all of the world's electronic devices. Who's the only man on the planet who can possibly



ALL IMAGES BY GILES KEYTE/UNIVERSAL



Two cars sandwich a behemoth military vehicle and, utilizing industrial-strength electromagnetism, cause it to flip, in "F9: The Fast Saga."

(Below) John Cena (L) and Vin Diesel square off as villain and hero, respectively; (bottom) this vehicle will hit every mine and emerge without a scratch.

stop him? Take a wild ... never mind. Sigh.

What kind of action do we get in this action movie? How's a minefield chase where they set off pretty much every mine, but nobody gets any body parts blown off? Then there's that aforementioned Tarzan-car-on-steroids canyon jump. Lots of car races, featuring the F&F-patented all-important timing of when to hit the rocket-boosters. Lots of punching and kicking and whacking.

One more new gizmo: the installing of powerful electromagnets in Dom and his boys' various muscle cars, which can then attract or repel other cars in high-speed chase scenes. Like, magnets so powerful they can open up one side of the truck you're driving, and then flip the magnets to attract mode, and they can suck a bad guy's car all the way through a store, into the truck, and trap him in there. Woo-hoo (not).

Old Stuff

In addition to all the new stuff, there's lots of old stuff, necessitating frequent flashbacks: like how Han (Sung Kang) from "Tokyo Drift" survived, in an earlier film. Charlize Theron, the villainess from "The Fate of the Furious" is also back, and Helen Mirren's back. Why are Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham not back? Surely that'll be for when they do "FX." See what I did there? Anybody want to wager whether that'll be the next movie's title?

The problem with this series, and by extension the Marvel-verse, the DC-verse, and indeed any action movie made today, is that



(Above) The primary actors in the silly "F9: The Fast Saga." (L-R) Sung Kang, Nathalie Emmanuel, Jordana Brewster, Ludacris, Tyrese Gibson, Michelle Rodriguez, and Vin Diesel.

(Left) Tej (Chris "Ludacris" Bridges, L) and Roman (Tyrese Gibson) fly a homemade mini-space shuttle.

the full-throttle outlandishness needed to keep an audience's ever-dwindling attention span has long since reached the limit and has now plunged headlong into absurdity. That's detrimental. That's harmful to humans.

Why? It turns audiences into morons. You'd think the audience, sitting in their theater seats would note the massive stupidity on display. You'd think you'd hear boos. But no. What's scary is that the audiences are now still suspending their disbelief.

For example, after a jaw-dropping, that-could-never-actually-happen sequence of a car flipping 558 times at a velocity where the first revolution would have decapitated the passengers, and the passengers casually get out completely unscathed—the audience actually cheered. Like the CGI did something impressive or something; like the concept is valid.

You know what this is? Whether intention or not, this serves the purpose of lies! This is lying, and, maybe this is just me, but this is getting audiences used to living with lies and rampant untruths. It's softening us up, getting us comfortable with a dearth of truth in this post-truth era—which comes right before a communist era. And it's been going on for decades now.

A further connection I see here: Foisting untruths is something that Marxism does. In the dystopian novel "1984" by George Orwell, the protagonist is put in a little room (like a movie theater) where he's grilled and told that two plus two equals five. He's forced to repeat this even though he knows it isn't true. This is the nature of communism and socialism. They want to force the lie and they want you to believe the lie.

Stella Morabito, senior contributor at The Federalist, in her 2017 article titled "The First 3 Phases of the Downward Slope From Freedom to Communism," puts it this way:

"The first phase towards tyranny in a free society is a generational or decades-long process. It's a period in which minds can be closed to reason and more influenced by emotion and propaganda. Even at institutions of supposedly higher learning, students start to lose their capacity to think independent thoughts. We might summarize this as the conditioning phase—maybe the 'programming' stage—that paves the way for groupthink to solidify."

It's really not a stretch to say that the lies foisted by current action movies, in terms of their rampant unbelievable, have already conditioned American audiences into a dangerous phase of groupthink. America awake! Call Hollywood out on the especially stupid, deleterious stuff. (Which is what I'm doing right here.)

There are still good films being made out there; there are still responsible, do-gooder filmmakers, actors, and films. But "F9: The Fast Saga" is not one of them. America's summer blockbuster is dead.

Long live the summer blockbuster.



Learning choreography for the new musical "Dear Miss Barrett" in one of the theater's rehearsal rooms at the Hendersonville Performing Arts Company.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL KUREK

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

The Power of Restraint: 'The Wrath of Achilles'

ERIC BESS

Have you ever had a moment when you felt anger rise from the pit of your stomach? Maybe someone did something or said something that really made you angry, and you could feel yourself about to do something that you might regret one day; but, instead, you stopped yourself.

The painting "The Wrath of Achilles" by French painter Louis Edouard Fournier reminds me that there's wisdom in the type of restraint I just described.

Achilles leans back with his muscles tense as he unsheathes his sword.

The Anger Between Achilles and Agamemnon

As legend has it, Achilles was the seemingly invincible warrior fighting for King Agamemnon and the Greeks in the Trojan War. Achilles, efficient at his job, sacked 12 cities around Troy during the first nine years of the war. However, Achilles and Agamemnon did not always get along. In one particular moment in Greek mythology, the two were at odds.

In the 10th year of the war, Agamemnon took the daughter of an Apollonian priest as a prize of war. The priest went to Agamemnon to request the return of his daughter, but Agamemnon refused. For his refusal, the priest prayed to Apollo to curse the Greeks with a plague. Afterward, a plague did haunt the people of Greece.

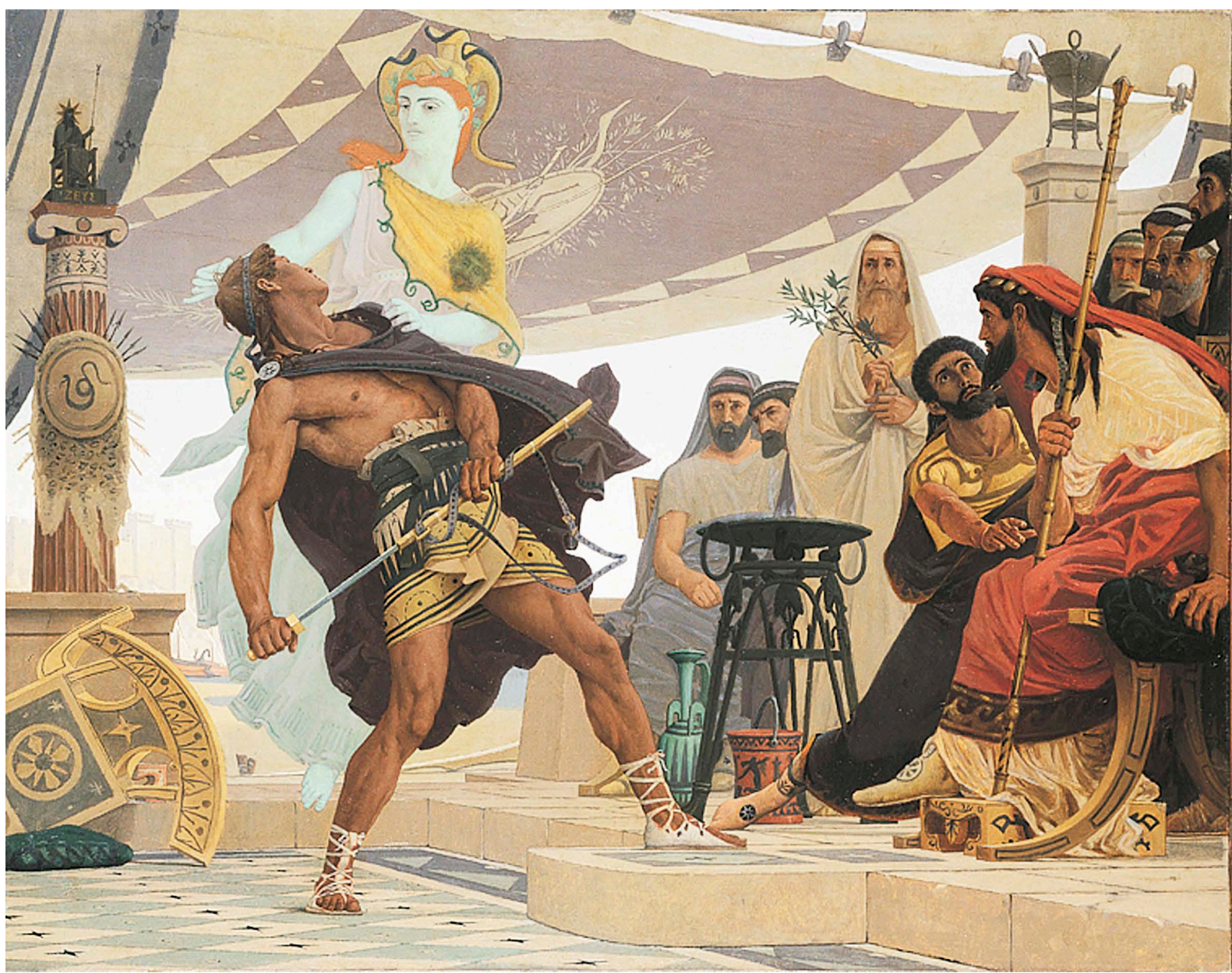
The goddess Hera inspired Achilles to inquire about the source of the plague. All of the Greeks believed that the plague was sacred, that is, that the gods were punishing them. A seer told Achilles that Apollo caused the plague because Agamemnon kept the Apollonian priest's daughter prisoner. To stop the plague, Agamemnon must return the girl and perform certain rituals.

Upon hearing this revelation, Agamemnon became angry and insulted the seer. The Greeks, however, fearing the plague, demanded that Agamemnon return the girl to her father. Agamemnon agreed but only if he was granted another girl to replace her.

Agamemnon's greed angered Achilles, and Achilles publicly criticized Agamemnon. In response to the criticism, Agamemnon demanded Achilles's own slave as a replacement. Enraged, Achilles reached for his sword to take Agamemnon's life.

Hera, however, loving both Achilles and Agamemnon, sent the goddess Athena to Achilles to encourage him to restrain himself. If he practiced restraint, Athena promised him a great future reward. Achilles agreed and put his sword away.

The counselor Nestor tried to advise Agamemnon and Achilles toward a compromise for the benefit of all of Greece, but the two men were too angry. Achilles left, and Agamemnon later sent men



"The Wrath of Achilles," (1881) by Louis Edouard Fournier. Oil on canvas, 44.4 inches by 57 inches. Beaux-Arts de Paris, Paris.



Self-portrait of the painter Louis Edouard Fournier.

(Left) The goddess Athena asks Achilles to restrain his assault on Agamemnon in this detail from "The Wrath of Achilles."

(Right) The seer (L) looks unmoved as Nestor (C) tries to calm King Agamemnon (in red) in a detail from "The Wrath of Achilles."

to Achilles to acquire his new female companion. Achilles gave his slave to Agamemnon, but, at least for a while, refused to fight in the war.

'The Wrath of Achilles'

In his painting "The Wrath of Achilles," Fournier depicted the moment that Athena intervenes between Achilles and Agamemnon.

Athena and Achilles occupy the left side of the composition. Achilles leans back with his muscles tense as he unsheathes his sword. The black of his cloak contrasts with the alabaster white skin of Athena. Achilles's anxious and angry energy also contrasts with Athena's calm demeanor: Athena gently places one hand on Achilles's shoulder, and she holds a lock of his hair with her other hand as she encourages him to restrain himself.

Sitting at the right side of the composition, dressed in red and white, is Agamemnon. The king holds a scepter in his hand, which signifies his status, and he leans toward Achilles—blind to Athena—with a watchful eye.

We can assume that Nestor is at the side of Agamemnon. Nestor has a concerned look on his face and reaches toward Agamemnon as if he is pleading for him to compromise. Behind Nestor is the seer, who is dressed in priestly garb. The seer calmly watches Achilles.

The Power of Restraint

There is wisdom in restraint, and I think Fournier's depiction gives us a visual

example of this wisdom.

Fournier depicted every muscle in Achilles's body as tight and tense. We can feel the stress coursing through his body. It's ironic how one of the most powerful warriors in Greek mythology almost loses power over himself. He almost lets his anger get the best of him. Can anger, when left unrestrained, cause stress in our lives and on our bodies?

Achilles is not the only one under stress, however. Both Agamemnon and Nestor appear in nearly the same state. Agamemnon, tightly clenching his scepter and holding onto his chair, seems unsure about Achilles's intentions. Nestor seems to be stressed by the anger between the two men.

The only two prominent figures who appear calm are Athena and the seer. As a communicator with the gods, the seer seems to understand that whatever happens is the will of the gods. He, therefore, shows little emotion or concern but simply watches the scene unfold.

Athena appears to accomplish much with little effort. Fournier did well in depicting her presence as a restrained contrast to that of Achilles. It's difficult to tell if Achilles is leaning back to unsheathe the sword of his own will or if the touch of the goddess bends his body back against his will. I'm going to go with the latter.

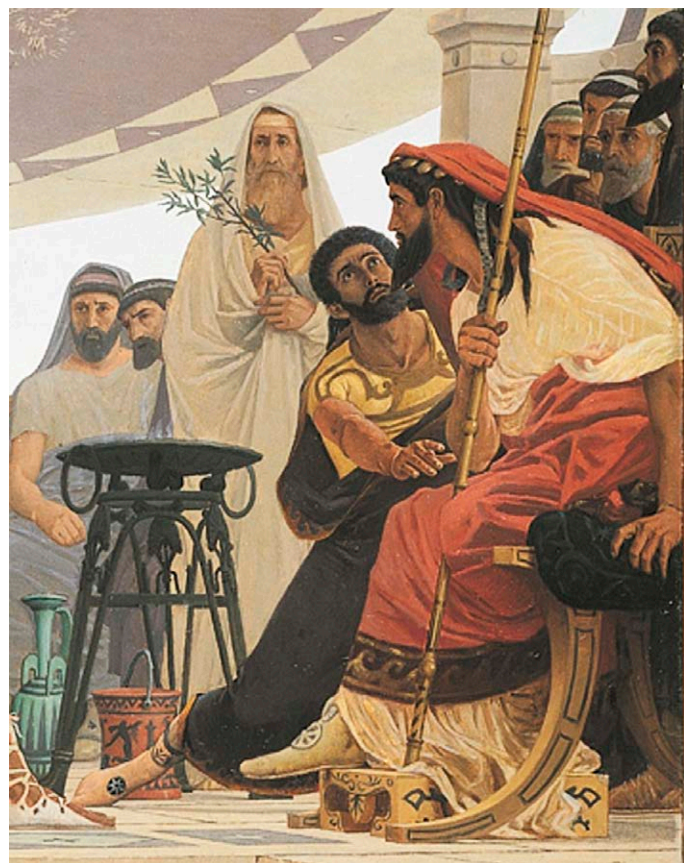
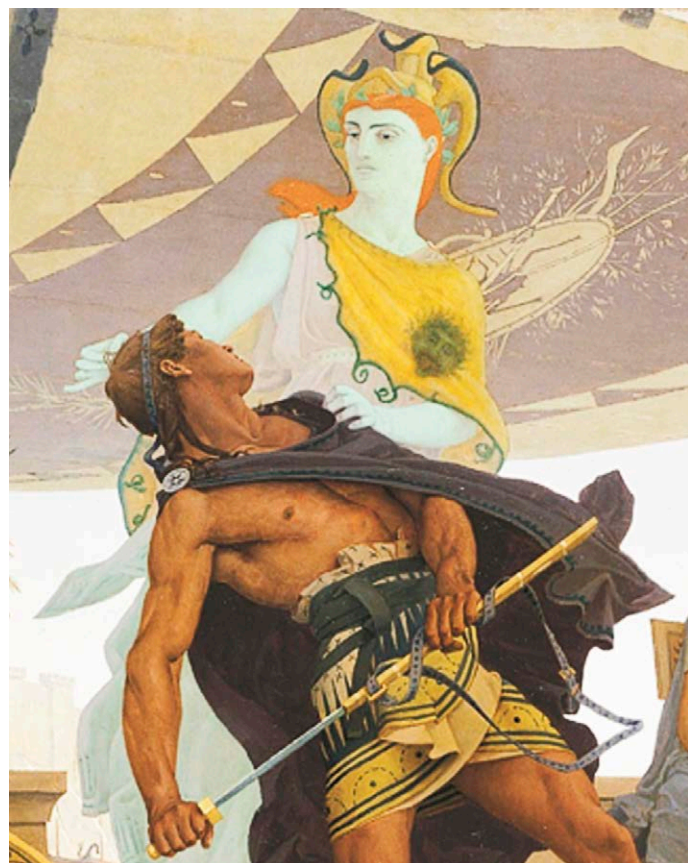
With one hand gently placed on Achilles's shoulder and with a lock of hair held between her index finger and thumb, Athena restrains one of the most accomplished warriors in Greek mythology. She tells Achilles that there's a greater reward for his restraint than for his wrath.

Athena's presence suggests that calm restraint accomplishes more than violent wrath, that there's more in it for us if we are calm and restrained than angry and unheeded.

How might we, when we feel anger rising from the pit of our stomach, remember to remain calm? How might we, in our own best interest, tap into the power of restraint?

The traditional arts often contain spiritual representations and symbols the meanings of which can be lost to our modern minds. In our series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart," we interpret visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We do not assume to provide absolute answers to questions generations have wrestled with, but hope that our questions will inspire a reflective journey toward our becoming more authentic, compassionate, and courageous human beings.

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



Each instrument consists of 3,500 separate parts.



An old photo of Rudolf Reist.



Samuel Reist, Hansruedi Reist, and Richard Reist.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Making an Accordion, the Swiss Way

Each Schwyzerörgeli requires 3,500 pieces. It is meticulous, delicate work.

WIBKE CARTER

There is a sound in Switzerland unlike any other, and one that rarely crosses the country's borders. No, I'm not talking about the ticking of millions of timepieces or the jingle of cowbells, but the musical tones created by the Örgeli. The Schwyzerörgeli, as it is properly called, is a type of diatonic button accordion used in Swiss folk music. Örgeli is the diminutive form of the word Orgel (organ). In a country of only 8.5 million people, very few still know how to build the delicate instrument, which consists of about 3,500 separate parts.

To learn more about the rare workmanship, I traveled to the remote Emmental Valley, where the renowned örgeli manufacturer Hansruedi Reist followed his father Rudolf into the trade 35 years ago. The unassuming window in Wasen's main street belies the treasures hiding behind in the studio and basement underneath. Every year, thousands of minuscule pieces laid out on long tables and taken from countless shelves are assembled here with meticulous precision to make about 150 örgeli.

The accordion was brought originally to Switzerland in the 1830s, soon after its invention in Vienna. The earliest versions were typically one- or two-row diatonic button instruments. A typical Schwyzerörgeli today has 18 bass buttons arranged in two rows (one for bass notes and one for major chords), and 31 treble buttons arranged in three rows. The difference between a normal accordion and the Schwyzerörgeli is that the direction of the air, in or out, produces two different tones. The unique tone is called "Schwyzerton," and it was this sound that fascinated Rudolf Reist early on.

"I've always been captivated by how such beautiful music comes into existence," said Rudolf. "When I was in third grade, I dismantled my first örgeli and had to borrow the six francs for it from our servant." The son of a farmer, he learned to play the instrument without ever taking classes, and when he fell on financial hardship in 1966, he began building örgeli in his spare time.

A Brilliant Difference

But how could he make his instrument different from all the others that were already available? Rudolf Reist had the brilliant idea to make the treble key arms, which control the air flow, of metal instead of wood. The difference was significant, as the metal parts guaranteed a consistent sound effect in humid conditions. A good friend of his, a truck driver, took the first Reist örgeli on his travel routes, and soon the elegant craftsmanship and beautiful sound of the instrument gained a reputation beyond the Emmental Valley.

The örgeli were soon in high demand, and after founding his own business in 1974, helped by his wife and oldest son Fritz, Rudolf managed to build 35 instruments in the first year, followed by 70 the following year. In the late 1970s, the waiting list had extended to six years. Originally, it took about 250 hours for one örgeli to be built, though this has been reduced to about 150 hours these days, as a few pieces can now be produced mechanically.

"Every instrument is unique and personalized," said Hansruedi Reist, who founded his own business in 1986 to look after the "special models" his father and older brother didn't want to work on.

"Our customers still need to wait about two years for their örgeli, though once they have it they tend to keep it forever," he said. The oldest örgeli in existence is more than 130 years old and still playable.

Besides sales in Switzerland, a few pieces are exported to Canada, the United



States—and South Korea, where Swiss folk music is surprisingly popular. "We once welcomed a young man who had traveled from Seoul to pick up his örgeli. And when he tried it out, he played beautifully. The whole team was flabbergasted," laughed Hansruedi.

Possessing such a personal instrument, of course, has its price. The cheapest örgeli start at around \$3,700, and the most expensive can cost up to \$15,000. Customers can choose between various components, such as size, color, wood, buttons, ornaments, and tone.

Today's örgeli are a lot more complex, but also lighter and prettier, as they have become more popular with women over the past few decades. Örgeli keep their value not only because Hansruedi Reist buys them back to give them to new interested customers, but also because they are quality products that last a long time if serviced regularly. Sometimes the Emmental native finds pieces built by his father, or even older ones end up in his antique collection.

The Production Process

The story of an örgeli begins several years before its production as the most important raw material is wood. Hansruedi Reist wanders in the woods in search of perfectly grained trees, mostly maple or spruce. The milled wood is then put into warehouses for 10 years, and then smaller parts are cut and kept in depots maintained at 55 percent humidity and at temperatures of 64 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit. Once the pre-cut wooden parts are fully dried, the six-month-long production of the instrument finally begins with the fine-tuning in the joinery. Parts are polished, designs are lasered, and holes are drilled for valves and buttons.

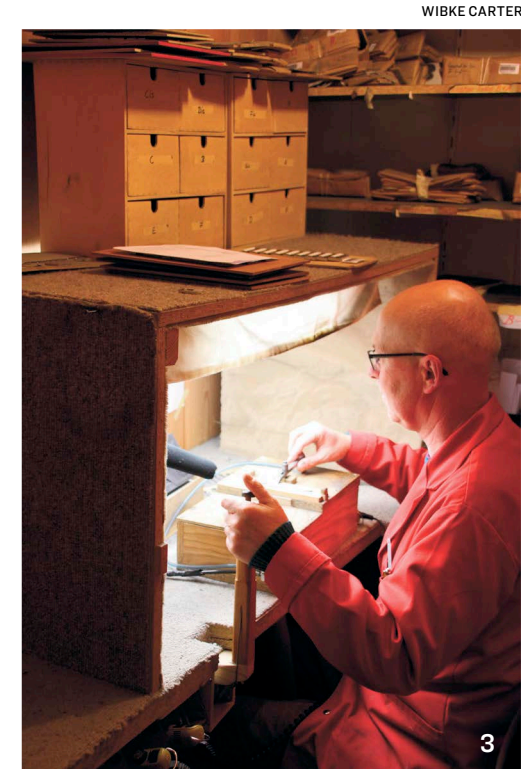
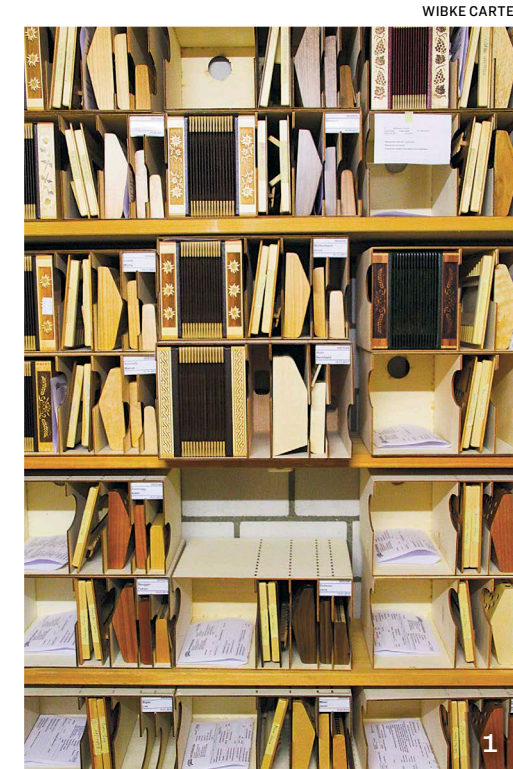
At this stage of the production process, many pieces are glued and pre-assembled. Once all the metal tone tongues with plates and leather pieces for the vents are set up, the tuning stage begins in a special room until the perfect sound is achieved. This rather cumbersome process is split evenly between the Reist team members. And then, finally, the whole örgeli can be pieced together, which sounds easier than it is because a lot of personalized parts are specific to each particular instrument and cannot be mixed up.

"Unfortunately, the job of the accordion builder doesn't exist anymore," said staff member Roland Gerber, who has worked for Reist for nearly 20 years.

"It takes about 1.5 years to be able to build an örgeli by yourself and it never gets boring. There's always the ambition to build a better accordion next time," he said.

In 1989, Hansruedi completed the invention of his "Turbo-Örgeli," followed by the models "One," "Junior," and "Light." The model "Little" is the smallest Schwyzerörgeli available. While offering the full tune scale of a normal instrument, it fits into a backpack.

Hansruedi Reist has no plans of slowing down or stopping improvements on his beloved örgeli, but a weight was lifted off his shoulder when both of his twin sons, Samuel and Richard, joined the business



1. Shelves with parts and customer orders. 2. A staff member cuts wood. 3. Andreas Liechti tunes a tone plate. 4. Metal tone plate tuning. 5. An old accordion brought in for repair.

a few years ago to continue the family tradition. And with Rudolf dropping into the workshop every other day, for "a bit of supervision, a funny joke, or some fine-tuning," he said, three generations of the Reist family will carry the sound of the Emmental Valley into the world for years to come.

Wibke Carter is a travel writer who hails from Germany. She has lived in New Zealand and New York, and presently enjoys life in London. Her website is WibkeCarter.com

ALL PHOTOS BY ABRAMORAMA

FILM REVIEW

Exploring the Dangers of Helicopter Parenting

MICHAEL CLARK

It is an unwritten but widely subscribed-to belief that parents want their children to be more financially successful, better-educated, healthier, and happier than themselves. Perhaps this is merely something imprinted on human DNA by a higher power, or maybe it's a mission taken on by many parents to prove their superior child-rearing skills.

As presented in the frequently ear-pinning documentary "Chasing Childhood," there came a tipping point in the late 20th century when parents began viewing their children as decades-long human improvement projects. However, like the proverbial road to hell, crafting the ideal path for the future success of one's offspring is paved with the best of intentions.

Children Forced to Be Adults

Co-writers and directors Margaret Munzer Loeb and Eden Wurmfeld approach the touchy subject matter with an amazing level of unbiased objectivity not seen in most modern documentaries. Each having grown up in New York City in the late 1970s and early '80s, Loeb and Wurmfeld were part of the last generation to experience childhood in a manner similar to that of those preceding them.

Once the school day ended, the biggest challenge facing most students back in the day was deciding whether to do their homework first or wait until after playing and blowing off steam until dark or dinnertime. By and large, they stayed in physical and mental shape while playing sports, exploring nature, and developing lifelong friendships. The closest children came to interaction of any kind with electronic devices was watching TV or tinkering with ham radio.

The offspring of Gen X children are the first to grow up with a full-time onslaught of social media, smartphones, and hundreds of cable TV channels, which are too often used as pacifiers delivered by their parents. In addition, the hours formerly dedicated

to down time are instead being filled with a litany of activities that, while looking good on a college application, are forcing kids to behave and perform like adults at the cost of developing social skills and learning to navigate life's assorted stumbling blocks. It is challenges and the conquering of adversity that contribute to future physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

The filmmakers include a brief story of one preteen New York boy who—depending on your own perspective—is either very brave or altogether misguided. Frustrated that his parents micromanage his every waking moment, the boy requests that he be allowed to travel unaccompanied across town on the subway. After much hemming and hawing, the parents acquiesce but track him on his phone for the entire trip. The look of victory and achievement on the boy's face at the end of the journey is beyond inspiring.

A Traditional College Degree Not Needed

Rather than providing multiple examples of the dangers of unbalanced overachieving, the filmmakers include just one: Savannah Eason of Wilton, Connecticut. Savannah filled every possible second of her youth taking advanced study courses in the quest to get into a top-shelf college. She did this with the blessing of her mother, Genevieve, who, to be fair, put no pressure on Savannah to excel but neither did she recognize that this came at the expense of a social life and a realistic understanding of life after high school.

In a particularly telling moment, Savannah is crushingly devastated after receiving the first "B" of her life and is sure it will ruin her long-term goals.

Without being too specific, things don't exactly go the way Savannah had planned. She loses faith in herself, finds it almost impossible to acclimate to life away from home, and seeks refuge in controlled substances. In the end, Savannah ultimately chooses a career she loves, where a traditional college education isn't necessary.



(Above) Children playing in a gym, and (left) a Halloween party, in scenes from "Chasing Childhood."

This subplot goes far in supporting the opinions of many financial advisers (such as Clark Howard) who advise against a private university education and the prospect of crippling student loan debt upon graduation. These experts suggest that students and their parents should consider other secure, high-paying careers they would actually enjoy instead of rolling the dice on an unknown one down the road.

As the film was shot prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be interesting to find out if helicopter parents altered their behavior while keeping company with their children for months on end. With group events (sports, music, specialty academic groups, and so on) postponed or outright canceled, were children allowed to venture into the outdoors and practice free will?

Did the sharp uptick in home-schooling lead to previously dormant emotional parent-child bonding?

Little to nothing good came from the pandemic, but if it made enough parents realize that their hovering was taking too much of a toll on their children, it would've made for a bittersweet silver lining.

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has written for over 30 local and national film industry media outlets and is ranked in the top 10 of the Atlanta media marketplace. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a regular contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles.

'Chasing Childhood'

Director
Margaret Munzer Loeb, Eden Wurmfeld

Starring
Genevieve Eason, Savannah Eason, Julie Lythcott-Haims, Peter Gray, Lenore Skenazy

Running Time
1 hour, 18 minutes

Not Rated

Release Date
June 25, 2021

★★★★★



Decorate Your Home With Shen Yun-inspired Splendors

Explore home decor and summer highlights

