

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

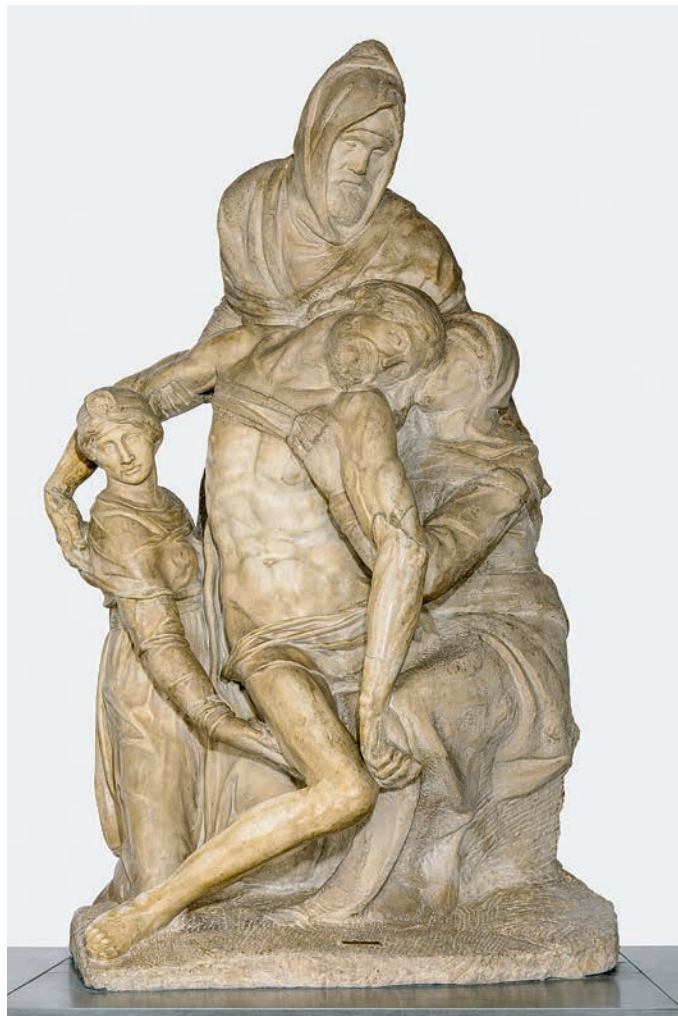
FINE ARTS

Did Michelangelo Destroy His Sculpture ‘The Deposition’?

A major restoration reveals a bit more about the myth of the ‘Bandini Pietà’

ALL PHOTOS BY ALENA FIALOVA/COURTESY OF OPERA DI SANTA MARIA DEL FIORE

In his old age, Michelangelo started sculpting ‘The Deposition.’



Before restoration: “The Deposition,” also known as the “Bandini Pietà,” by Michelangelo. Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy.



LORRAINE FERRIER

It’s the middle of the 16th century. Sparks fly every which way as Michelangelo, at around 75 years old, furiously carves Christ, Nicodemus, the Virgin Mary, and St. Mary Magdalene into a piece of marble over 7 feet tall.

Michelangelo rendered Christ as he had just fallen from the cross. There’s a palpable dynamic energy to the piece titled “The Deposition” that makes one almost hold one’s breath as the three surrounding fig-

ures all attempt to steady Christ’s lifeless body. Nicodemus towers compassionately over the composition, trying to prop up Christ while seemingly allowing the Virgin Mary to bid her son farewell. Christ’s right arm wraps around a rather diminutive St. Mary Magdalene.

Christ’s head slumps toward his mother, or perhaps she pulls him close as he sits on one of her knees. One can imagine her whispering farewell in his ear.

The piece is one of Michelangelo’s last sculptures, a farewell sculpture

of sorts, and was intended to be part of Michelangelo’s tomb. Poignantly, Nicodemus, who purportedly carried Christ to his tomb, is Michelangelo’s self-portrait.

Perhaps this is how Michelangelo wanted us to remember him. Nicodemus looks down at Christ with such tenderness and devotion, maybe reflecting Michelangelo’s faith as a devout Catholic, and also the realization that he will soon join him.

Michelangelo never finished “The Deposition,” and the sculpture never made it to his tomb. For years, many

experts believed that Michelangelo, in a fit of rage and frustration, partially destroyed the sculpture with his hammer; Christ’s left arm is broken and his left leg is missing. A recently completed restoration of the sculpture has revealed more of what might have actually happened.

Michelangelo’s Three Pietà Sculptures
Michelangelo created three Pietà sculptures in his life.

Continued on Page 4

▲ After restoration: “The Deposition.”



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FINE ARTS

A 500-Year Debate: Giorgione's 'The Tempest'

JEFF MINICK

In Mark Helprin's novel "A Soldier of the Great War," we meet Alessandro Giuliani, a young Italian studying philosophy and aesthetics. The Great War—World War I—upends his plans for a career as a professor contemplating art and beauty, and we follow him through battles, imprisonment and near execution by his own army, and capture by enemy forces. During these ordeals he meets Ariane, the nurse he quickly comes to love. Thinking she has died in a bombing of the dispensary, he spends the years immediately after the war working odd jobs and trying to mend his psychological wounds.

Oddly enough, a major character in this book is the Italian artist Giorgione's "La Tempesta," or "The Tempest," a painting from the early 16th century. Alessandro is enamored of this mysterious canvas, spends parts of the novel either pondering its meaning or discussing it with others, and eventually, when a museum guard remembers a woman weeping in the gallery in front of "The Tempest," is reunited with the love of his life.

Because of "A Soldier of the Great War," I too became fascinated by this painting.

The Artist

Though popularly known as Giorgione, which means "Big George" or "Tall George," we know little about Giorgio da Castelfranco's life. The online site The Art Story gives us the basics of his history. He was born around 1477 in Castelfranco Veneto, about 25 miles from the Republic of Venice. The legend surrounding him proclaims him a handsome man who grew up in modest circumstances and whose mother died while he was still a child. We know too that he succumbed to the plague in 1510 in a Venetian hospital.

Despite his family's circumstances, he was clearly a painter of singular talent from a young age. He was 13 when he found a place as an apprentice in the studio of master artist Giovanni Bellini. Art historians, including Giorgio Vasari, credit him with changing Venetian artistic techniques, pointing other artists toward the classics and mythology for their subjects, and encouraging an interest in painting landscapes.

Others have also showered him with praise. In 1528, Castiglione, who wrote the classic "Book of the Courtier," judged him the equal of artists like Raphael and Michelangelo. The 20th-century poet Gabriele D'Annunzio reckoned him "more a myth than a man" and added "no poet on earth has a destiny to compare with his."

And as critic Ernst Gombrich pointed out, what is most remarkable about these accolades is that only five paintings have been recognized as creations of Giorgione.



A detail of the soldier, shepherd, or actor, depending on the interpretation.



What is this strange object near the center of the painting?

One of these is "The Tempest."

Its Mysterious Meaning

The meaning of "The Tempest" has perplexed critics then and now. Unlike our modernist abstract schools of art, where the viewer must form his own opinions of the meaning of geometric shapes, dripped paint, or minimalist images, "The Tempest" offers realistic human figures—a man with a staff in his hand and a nearly naked mother breast-feeding her baby—occupying a green space beneath two windswept trees, while in the background a river leads our eyes into a city beset with lightning bolts and turbulent clouds.

But who are they? Why are they there? And what is the meaning of the storm over the town?

Every time I look at this painting, different interpretations occur to me.

Why does the woman wear only a light shawl? Why is she looking directly at us? And who is the man studying her? Is he a husband, a lover, or a passer-by who has stumbled across a scene of beauty and motherhood? We're not even sure of his profession. In his online article, art historian James R. Jewitt explains that some believe him to be a shepherd, some a soldier, and some an actor as "his multicolored hose and fancy jacket correspond to theatrical costumes of Venetian 'Compagnie della Calza' (Confraternities of the Sock), who often staged plays with rustic countryside settings resembling Giorgione's landscape."

A Few Interpretations

Some contend that the man and woman represent Adam and Eve, cast out from Paradise, which is symbolized by the storm-torn city. Other students of art and history believe that "The Tempest" is Giorgione's comments on the politics of his day, when the region was under siege during the War of the League of Cambrai.

Still others hold that the artist had no specific meaning in mind at all, that he painted with the intention of allowing viewers to formulate their own interpretations, or that he offered us a fantasy without a clearly defined subject. Jewett writes: "In this line of reasoning, with 'The Tempest' Giorgione invents the Renaissance genre of 'poesia' (pl. 'poesie'). This mode of painting aspires to the highly lyrical and musical qualities of verse, and resembles visual poetry meant to generate multi-layered responses."

The romantic in me likes Mark Helprin's interpretation in "A Soldier of the Great War," where Alessandro tells Ariane: "They say, what could it mean, a woman with a child, disrobed, and the soldier, standing apart from her, disconnected. But I know exactly what to make of it. ... He intended to praise elemental things, and to show a soldier on the verge of return. I'm

not surprised that scholars and critics don't understand it. Giorgione lived in the time of the plague, and the scholars and critics, for the most part, have had to do without plague or war, which make the simple things one takes for granted shine like gold. What does the painting mean? It means love. It means coming home."

Entranced by a Conundrum

Unlike some people I know, I like mysteries. Whether being mystified by a woman's thoughts and actions or by the miracle of this globe spinning through space, I don't need answers to every question confronting me.

"The Tempest" stays in my head precisely because of its mysteries. Every time I look at this painting, different interpretations occur to me. What does that expression on the woman's face mean? Does she consider those of us looking at her as intruders? Is that man a soldier or a pilgrim or a member of some Venetian acting guild? What is that contraption in the center of the painting that to my eye, as a guy raised in North Carolina, looks like the barbecue grills I saw all over town as a kid? Why is a naked woman breast-feeding her baby on a rock? Why does the man pause to look at her? Is he entranced with her beauty or are they family?

Here's the thing, at least for an amateur like me: Art doesn't always have to provide answers. It doesn't always need to be explicit in its intentions.

Instead, a painting, a sculpture, or a poem can raise questions and fire up the imagination. Like the day at sunrise, the laughter of my grandchildren, or a woman's face by candlelight, great art can create a sense of wonder and curiosity.

Which is why, three or four times a year, I revisit Giorgione's "The Tempest."

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.



"The Tempest," circa 1505, by Giorgione. Oil on canvas; 32.2 inches by 28.7 inches. Gallerie dell'Accademia.

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TRADITIONAL CULTURE

‘The Evil CCP Will Crumble’: Polish-Born Artist Depicts Children Persecuted in China

PETA EVANS

For one Polish-born artist who grew up under communist rule in the '50s and '60s, learning of the persecution endured by families and children of faith in modern-day China was shocking, but not surprising.

Having lived through oppression herself as a child during Poland's post-Stalinist era lends credence to one of her paintings in which she portrays the "often overlooked" suffering of the children whose parents have been persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

"Children are an easy target after they take the parents away," Australian artist Barbara Schafer told The Epoch Times. "Chinese children are being bullied for their faith, many are excluded from school, punished for attending church and religious activities outside of school, forced into reciting anti-religion and pro-atheism slogans, and coerced into signing documents renouncing their faith."

Schafer, now 68, was only 12 years old when her own father, a glassblower, died in communist-controlled Poland in 1965 after having been incarcerated in a concentration camp during World War II. He survived the camp, but not the poor health he suffered for years afterward.

"Countless Polish people died in Soviet gulags and from starvation," Schafer said. "At the same time, double-size trains were going 24 hours a day to the Soviet Union, stealing everything from Poland they desired."

Growing Up in Communist Poland

Born in Skawina near Krakow in 1953, just eight years after the end of World War II, Schafer said that it was "another dark page in our history" and "a day the Polish people will never forget" when the allies handed over the territories of Poland and other Eastern European countries to the Soviet regime at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. "The traitors and the party mem-

bers lived in extreme wealth and opulence," she said. "As for the rest of the people, some were still happy because the war had ended; they shared their joys and drowned their sorrows in vodka."

For the Polish people, happiness over the war's end was overshadowed by the reality of living under their new communist government, and Schafer would grow up learning what it meant to suffer from oppression.

"Many of my family members have been persecuted by the ruthless, tyrannical communist regime," said Schafer. She's lived in Melbourne since 1987 after first having migrated from Poland to New Zealand 10 years prior with her husband, an aircraft engineer, when she was 24.

As a child, believing that the Polish media was working for the people, young Schafer had once written letters to the newspaper and radio expressing her concerns—and suffered the bitter consequences. "My mother was punished for it," she said.



Barbara Schafer with her oil painting "Gratitude" on exhibit at the 2019 NTD International Figure Painting Competition in New York.



(Left) "The Sea of Suffering" by Barbara Schafer. Oil on canvas; 47 1/4 inches by 47 1/4 inches.

(Above) A detail of "The Sea of Suffering" oil painting: An 8-month-old baby boy, Meng Hao, who was persecuted to death along with his mother.

“The evil Chinese Communist Party will crumble for torturing to death millions of good, innocent people.”

Barbara Schafer, artist

Freedom of information, she discovered, was nonexistent. "Every letter that we got from the West was opened, and some information in it was painted over with black ink."

Schafer recalled how, from an early age, she used to stand guard at the window while her father listened to Radio Free Europe or Voice of America, telling him who was passing by, because there was a prison sentence for it.

"Some people could not be trusted," she said.

"As the communist rules were infiltrating every aspect of our society, people became more demoralized, arrogant, lazy, and self-centered. Shops were getting more and more empty. Corruption and bribes were widespread, and the ration cards for food were introduced."

Referring to communist indoctrination in schools, Schafer, now a mother and grandmother, said that the Polish children all knew that some teachers were "lying to keep their jobs," but in truth, they really wished to hold on to their traditions.

It was determined faith that gave the Polish people hope, she said.

"What the Soviets could not do in Poland was to destroy the faith in God that kept the Polish people going," she said. "The government knew that destroying churches would lead to their demise. Unfortunately, they had spies among the clergy as well."

She said that many of the good clergymen were persecuted and killed for standing against communism.

By 1960, the Soviets had built a huge steel refinery named after Vladimir Lenin (the Lenin Steel-works) on the outskirts of Krakow, as well as an aluminum smelter on the other side. However, Schafer said that the refineries' chimneys didn't have filters, and the industrial constructions were in stark contrast to the rest of the historic city.

"My beloved city of Krakow, the city of Polish kings and culture, was being eroded. The intricate architectural details were affected as well as people's health," said Schafer, who has worked in the restoration and conservation of historical buildings.



Barbara Schafer as a child with her parents in Poland.

'The Sea of Suffering' in Communist China

Poland became free from communist rule with the overthrow and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Schafer believes that the same fate will be faced by China's communist regime today.

"Just like with the persecution of Christians during the Roman Empire, the evil CCP will crumble for torturing to death millions of good, innocent people," she said.

The ongoing abuses against children in communist China are of immense concern to Schafer, who studied fine arts for seven years in Poland. Her oil painting "The Sea of Suffering" was produced in honor of the silent suffering of Falun Gong children who have died or lost parents as a result of the CCP's now-22-year persecution of the faith.

"Many became orphans or lost family members they loved. A beautiful rainbow takes some of them to heaven," Schafer said, referring to the children in her painting, whom she has depicted sitting on white lotus flowers—representing "purity and innocence"—reaching as far as the horizon.

Each child depicted in the painting is a real child with a true story of persecution.

One child is an 8-month-old baby boy, Meng Hao, who was persecuted to death along with his mother on Nov. 7, 2000, because she practiced Falun Gong. According to the coroner's exam, the mother's neck and knuckle bones were broken, her skull was sunken, and there was a needle stuck in her waist. There were two black-and-blue spots on her baby son's head, and there was blood in his nose. There were two deep bruises around his little ankles, which were likely caused when he was handcuffed by his feet and hung upside down.

In Schafer's painting, baby Meng Hao is seen clutching a closed lotus flower, which represents his deceased mother. He's also in the rainbow, which is taking him to heaven.

Another child, Huang Ying, who is depicted in the painting lost her mother to the persecution when she was 18 months old. When Ying



"Gratitude" by Barbara Schafer. Oil on canvas; 45.7 inches by 33 inches.

was only 3 months old, she was forced to separate from her mother, and that was the last time she saw her alive; her mother was persecuted to death on Dec. 5, 2002. Her father, also a Falun Gong practitioner, was detained in a labor camp at the time and didn't even know his wife had died. Ying was then raised by her grandparents, who couldn't afford to send her to school.

"Children suffer in silence," Schafer said. "Often, they are born into a suffering world. They accept it because they don't know anything else, but deep inside, the damage is horrendous."

The 'Purity and Good Nature' of Children

Schafer, who believes that "peace and good values will prevail," hopes her paintings will spark curiosity in some viewers. She says that even if for a moment they ponder about the meaning of life, her work is not in vain.

Schafer especially likes to depict the "purity and good nature" of children from different countries in her artworks. "They have so much in common before they grow up and become influenced by their society," she said.

A couple of her paintings of children have been displayed at various

exhibitions, including her painting "Gratitude"—of two young sisters of the Falun Gong faith dressed in the traditional costume of their family's Korean heritage—which was displayed at the 5th NTD International Figure Painting Competition in New York in 2019; and her portraits of children dressed in traditional Polish costume, displayed at a Polish community art exhibition titled "Roots" in Melbourne, Australia, in 2018.

"I truly believe that the only way out for mankind is if people correct their own mistakes and improve their kindness and compassion for each other," she said.

FINE ARTS

Did Michelangelo Destroy His Sculpture 'The Deposition'?

A major restoration reveals a bit more about the myth of the 'Bandini Pietà'

Continued from Page 1

The most well-known is the Vatican Pietà that he created as a young artist. For that work, many thought he rendered Mary too young to have an adult child. On hearing this, Michelangelo simply said she appeared youthful because sin ages a person.

In his old age, Michelangelo

started sculpting "The Deposition" along with the Rondanini Pietà (now in Milan). During that time, he was also the architect of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, one of his most challenging projects. He likely spent countless hours carving the pieces, snatching small pockets of time while overseeing the works at St. Peter's.

It's important to note that "The

Deposition" is not Michelangelo's alone. He gave the unfinished work to his servant Antonio da Casteldurante, who entrusted it to the sculptor Tiberio Calcagni to repair. Calcagni died before he finished his repairs. Art historian and friend of Michelangelo, Giorgio Vasari commented that the sculpture was better off for Calcagni's death: Calcagni finished St. Mary Magdalene, making her smaller, and he badly repaired Christ's broken arm, as well as adding additional marble pieces to the work.

Antonio sold the work to the banker Francesco Bandini, hence the reason "The Deposition" is commonly called the "Bandini Pietà." After some changes of hands, Cosimo III de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, bought the work in 1671. The sculpture was moved to Florence, where it spent nearly 50 years in the crypt of San Lorenzo Church (St. Lawrence Church), and then over 250 years in Florence Cathedral. In 1981, it was moved

to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo (Museum of Works at the Duomo), where it's been ever since.

A Revealing Conservation

Despite its being one of Michelangelo's famous works, and other than Calcagni's repairs some 470 years ago, "The Deposition" has had only routine conservation treatments, such as cleaning and general maintenance.

The major restoration efforts have made a striking difference. The American-based nonprofit Friends of Florence Foundation funded the restoration work, and the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore (Work of St. Mary of the Flower) commissioned and directed the restoration, which began in 2019.

All the signs of an aging monument have been removed, thanks to the conservation efforts led by Paola Rosa and Emanuela Peiretti, alongside in-house and outside experts. Conservators used cotton wool soaked in deionized water,

which was sometimes heated, to remove the grime. Scalpels were carefully applied to areas that had stubborn dirt.

Now, the sculpture has lost its amber tint to reveal splendid white marble. Gone is the plaster residue left from a cast taken in 1882. Gone is the wax coating that conservators had hoped would protect the work from drying out after the cast had been taken. Gone are the centuries-old deposits of dust and wax. The grime marred exquisitely carved details such as the drapery folds and sculptural reliefs.

As part of the conservation effort, experts tested the marble and discovered that it was mined in Seravezza in Tuscany, from a quarry once owned by the preeminent Medici family. Experts previously believed that it was made of Carrara marble, the Tuscan quarry Michelangelo is famously associated with.

Michelangelo had concerns about the quality of marble mined at Seravezza. He had used Seravezza

marble for the façade of St. Lawrence Church in Florence, as directed by Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici (who later became Pope Leo X). The artist found that it appeared pure on the surface but was prone to minute cracks and sudden veining, which were difficult to detect.

Did Michelangelo Destroy 'The Deposition'?

Conservators detected none of Michelangelo's destructive hammer blows on the piece, but those could have been erased by someone later. That part of the story is inconclusive.

Analysis of "The Deposition" marble, however, confirmed that the block was flawed. The marble was riddled with inclusions of pyrite, commonly known as fool's gold, which caused dramatic sparks to fly when struck with a chisel. Numerous minute cracks were found on the back and front of the sculpture's base, leading experts to conclude that Michelangelo may have had to



A conservator carefully cleans the "Bandini Pietà," one of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures.

stop working on "The Deposition." Michelangelo may not have destroyed his work after all, but it makes for a good story.

Visitors to the Museum of Works

at the Duomo (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo) have until March 30, 2022, to view "The Deposition" up close, in the same workshop space where it was restored. To find out more, visit Duomo.Firenze.it

Michelangelo never finished 'The Deposition,' and the sculpture never made it to his tomb.

Evangeline Zhu won first place in New Tang Dynasty Television's 2016 International Classical Chinese Dance Competition (adult female division).

PERFORMING ARTS

ARTIST PROFILE

Beauty Through Tradition: Shen Yun

What 'beauty' means to Evangeline Zhu whose mission is to revive 5,000 years of civilization

CATHERINE YANG

Evangeline Zhu was at Lincoln Center in New York, hours away from stepping on stage, when she got the news: The show would not go on. In the 14 years that Shen Yun Performing Arts had been performing, seldom had there been a canceled show—though the Chinese Communist Party has certainly tried to have Shen Yun canceled. Zhu thought it was a joke; it turned out to be anything but. A pandemic was sweeping across the world, shuttering gathering places and venues for art and entertainment.

It was a year and a half before Zhu could come face-to-face with the audience once more. In September, she took to the stage in Stamford, Connecticut, with a heart of gratitude.

"It's pretty exciting," she said ahead of the show. "It's been a year since I've seen an audience."

In that interim period, Zhu and her dancer colleagues in Shen Yun have kept busy. In recent years, the New York-based dance company has been perfecting and reviving a dance method that has been lost to modern-day China.

Body Language

Zhu says that dance is a body language. "You have to use your body to express what you're feeling, to communicate your message to the audience," she said.

As such, the ancient method of "shen dai shou," or the body leading the arms and hands, has completely changed the way Shen Yun's classical Chinese dance looks on stage. In essence, the technique does exactly what its name says: The body leads the arms and hands into movement, and the body is alive with movement in dance.

"When you can communicate from the heart, that's the strongest expression," Zhu said. "And then, you can communicate even without words."

A requirement of this method is that the force driving upper body movement begins at the center of the body, over the heart. So essentially, you are dancing from the heart, and the dance is even more expressive, Zhu explained. "After learning this method, our classical Chinese dance is grander, clearer, and gives people this sense of brightness."

This is a method that appears only in name in old dance and pedagogy books, but the instructions for how to do it and how to teach it have otherwise been completely lost. Yet, those who are familiar with Shen Yun's mission seem to grasp why Shen Yun is the only dance company that has recovered this sought-after method: Shen Yun seeks to revive the true traditional Chinese culture, Zhu said.

She explained that from careful research and restoration of traditional dance techniques to living out traditional values, like the Confucian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, all of Shen Yun's artists have pursued this path of tradition in order to bring audiences something truly bright and positive.

"Dance expresses what is in your heart,

“Dance expresses what is in your heart.”

Evangeline Zhu, principal dancer, Shen Yun



Evangeline Zhu, a principal dancer in Shen Yun Performing Arts.

Shen Yun's Upcoming Performances

Modesto	California	until Oct. 27
Escondido	California	Oct. 23-24
Cedar Rapids	Iowa	Oct. 23-24
Detroit	Michigan	Oct. 27-31
Phoenix	Arizona	Oct. 27-28
Thousand Oaks	California	Oct. 30-31
Fresno	California	Oct. 30-31
Albuquerque	New Mexico	Nov. 1-2
Boise	Idaho	Nov. 2-3
Denver	Colorado	Nov. 4-7
Norfolk	Virginia	Nov. 5-6
West Palm Beach	Florida	Nov. 8-9
Boston	Massachusetts	Nov. 13-14
New Brunswick	New Jersey	Nov. 20-21

For additional performance dates, please check ShenYun.com/tickets

and Shen Yun's dancers are, step by step, cultivating their character, working on their hearts," she said. "We strive to do everything to the standard of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance."

A Bright Feeling

Zhu's mother had an unrealized dream of being a dancer, so before she had Zhu, she had the thought that if her child ever showed an interest in dance, she would support it. As a young girl, Zhu took dance classes, but she had no concept of dance as a career. And then she heard of Shen Yun.

"I think it was fated," she said. She saw what looked like ethereal beings gliding across the stage, and remembers the physical sensation of what felt like a winged horse-drawn chariot soaring above her during the show's opening. Becoming part of Shen Yun became her dream.

This is another thing that Zhu thinks Shen Yun does differently: From the moment the curtains open, the audience is

invited into a world that is bright, beautiful, and wonderful.

"There's actually a lot of hopelessness and listlessness in the world, but then suddenly you see this scene of wonder, and it kind of washes away the negative. ... You see something bright and positive—and grand. You experience something greater than yourself, and somehow the day-to-day troubles feel lesser."

"It's a scene of heaven," she said.

"Dance and music transcends culture; this is why any audience understands Shen Yun," Zhu said. "Things like truth, goodness, and beauty are universal."

"And I think art that can inspire and elevate people is what is truly beautiful," she said. "Art can elevate us—and I think art is something we all need in our lives."

NTD contributed to this report.

The Epoch Times is a proud sponsor of Shen Yun Performing Arts. For more information please visit ShenYunPerformingArts.org

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

A Gentle Reminder to Think Righteously: 'Temptation of Sir Percival'

ERIC BESS

Achieving great things often means passing great tests. Our tests frequently deal with overcoming some type of hardship, and some of our greatest hardships are those in which our characters are tempted.

The "Temptation of Sir Percival," a painting by English painter Arthur Hacker, depicts a moment of temptation from the book "Le Morte d'Arthur (The Death of Arthur)" by the 15th-century English author Thomas Malory.

A Knight's Story

"The Death of Arthur" retells the story of King Arthur, his Knights of the Round Table, and the quest for Holy Grail. As the story goes, Sir Percival, one of the Knights of the Round Table, attempts to find another of the knights, Sir Galahad.

There is a point in the story where Sir Percival loses his horse and is given another by a mysterious woman. Sir Percival mounts his new horse and rides it until, after praying to God for safety while crossing a river, the horse reveals itself to be a fiend, which dies in the water. Realizing how close he was to being led to destruction, Sir Percival prays to God to protect him from temptation.

Back on foot, Sir Percival walks into a valley where he sees a snake fighting a lion. The knight, believing that the lion is the more righteous of the two animals, slays the snake. The lion shows its appreciation before leaving Sir Percival alone again.

The knight falls asleep and dreams that two women approach him. The younger woman sits upon a lion and, before she disappears, tells him to prepare for the greatest battle of his life.

The older woman sits upon a snake and asks why he killed her snake. He apologizes and offers to make it up to her. She requests that he lay with her, which he refuses. She then tells him she will wait for him to let down his guard, and then she disappears.

Sir Percival awakens and later sees sailing toward him a ship covered, within and without, in black silk. In the vessel is a bejeweled woman of great beauty. She tells him that she saw Sir Galahad, and that she will show him where Sir Galahad is if he will return a favor. Sir Percival agrees.

She then offers him food and drink, and since he had not eaten in three days, he

Hacker depicted the moment in the story when Sir Percival overcomes temptation.



A bust of Arthur Hacker in bronze, 1884, by Edward Onslow Ford, from the Royal Academy Illustrated.

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

accepts. He eats, and then drinks a most potent wine. In his drunkenness, he thinks the woman is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Stirred by lust, Sir Percival asks her to lay with him. They both undress.

Before Sir Percival falls to temptation, he sees his sword—a reminder of his oath to be a righteous knight—and he prays.

His prayer turns everything around them into black smoke, and the woman leaves with her ship. Sir Percival is ashamed and punishes himself. He then meets with an older man who arrives on a ship covered in white silk. The older man tells him that the beautiful woman was the same one as in his dream, the one who rode in on a serpent, and that both were manifestations of the Devil.

Sir Percival would continue his journey, resist temptation, and become one of the three knights who sought the grail.

Hacker's "The Temptation of Sir Percival" Hacker depicted the moment in the story when Sir Percival overcomes temptation. The focal point is Sir Percival, who is shown fully dressed in knight's armor. He sits upon the earth and holds a chalice in his hands. A halo representing his holiness surrounds his head, and he looks sternly at his sword. His sword stands upright, plunged into the ground next to his helmet.

To the left is the beautiful woman. She has flowers in her hair and wears a beautiful, flowing gossamer dress. However, her body is positioned as if she is a snake slithering toward her prey. She looks intently at Sir Percival as if she is waiting for him to take another drink of his wine and lay with her.

The environment also helps to tell the story. It is dusk, and the last rays of light fall upon Sir Percival's helmet and sword. Dying leaves surround them except around Sir Percival's helmet and sword—they sit amid greenery. In the background to the right, a shadowy childlike figure appears to snicker, revealing the event's deceptive nature.

A Gentle Reminder to Resist Temptation To me, Sir Percival is such a relatable hero here. We all have fallen victim to temptation; we all have made decisions that we later regret. Sir Percival does things wrong until he is reminded to do right, and it is his sword that reminds him of his sacred oath—as a knight who strove to be pure of

heart—to keep his mind on God.

There's another nugget of wisdom here: it is the gentleness of the sun's rays that directs Sir Percival's attention toward his sword—a weapon of force that he does not need to use here. Despite the temptation around him, he is calm and stoic. The gentle green growth around the items that remind him of his righteous oath suggests that true life does not come from giving in to temptation but comes from our ability to resist it.

We don't have to be angry, hateful, or even forceful in resisting temptations or in being reminded of our righteous potential. So often, we want to force our beliefs on others because we believe these beliefs are right. We want, by any means necessary, to be correct.

The combination of feeling right and forcing our beliefs on others can give us a sense of power, which can easily become a temptation in itself. In fact, when we force our beliefs on others, we often legitimize succumbing to this temptation in the confidence that we are doing good.

And how does Sir Percival resist temptation? He puts his mind on God. His focus is no longer on the woman, the source of his temptation (though she focuses on him). His righteous thoughts—represented by the halo around his head—reveals to us that his mind is on God.

The tempting illusion around him is no match for even the thought of God.

I often think that we are heroes on our own journeys. Today, our journeys are bombarded with temptations. They seem to be sewn into the fabric of our society. Temptation is so prevalent that it can sometimes be difficult to even identify them as such. But it's never too late to gently resist with righteous thoughts and with our minds on God.

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.



"Temptation of Sir Percival," 1894, by Arthur Hacker. Oil on Canvas, 52 inches by 62 inches. Leeds Art Gallery, England.

GOLDEN AGE FILMS

A Brilliant Mix of Drama, Comedy, and Memorable Characters

IAN KANE

A mysterious drifter rides his horse through a harsh yet beautiful desert landscape. We see cracked earth and scrub brush in the foreground and a rugged range of mountains that sprouts up in the hazy background. Soon we see text scroll up that begins with: "After the Civil War, America, in the throes of rebirth, set its face West where the land was free. First came the cattlemen and with them 'Judge' Roy Bean ..."

Although William Wyler's hidden gem of a Western film, 1940's "The Westerner," starts off like many others, I soon discovered that this was a different cinematic animal altogether. With its drama, a bit of romance, and lots of side-splitting humor, I knew halfway into watching it that I'd add it to my Top 10 list—it's just that great.

As the film begins, a group of cattle herders are peeved that their stock keep getting caught on homesteaders' fences. The homesteaders have recently arrived and plopped down near the small town of Vinegaroon, Texas. When the cowboys spot the homesteaders responsible for putting up the fences, the two groups become involved in a running gunfight that results



Judge Roy Bean (Walter Brennan, L) and Cole Harden (Gary Cooper) match wits.



"The Westerner" is a refreshing take on the Western-film genre.

This film is one of the funniest Westerns I've ever seen (probably the funniest).

'The Westerner'

Director
William Wyler

Starring
Gary Cooper, Walter Brennan, Doris Davenport

Running Time
1 hour, 40 minutes

Not Rated

Release Date
Sept. 20, 1940

★★★★★

in one of the homesteaders being captured for killing a cow.

The homesteader is brought into town, where he is quickly convicted of killing the cow, a crime for which the area's ultimate arbiter of law—Judge Roy Bean (Walter Brennan)—sentences the man to death. Since Bean is a "hangin' judge" who dispenses his highly dubious sentences from his saloon's long bar table—his court—the accused man is hastily hanged for his supposed offense. It's clear that Bean sides with the cattlemen.

Soon, the mysterious drifter, Cole Harden (Gary Cooper), arrives in town escorted in handcuffs by local lawmen. He's been accused of stealing a horse belonging to Bean's good drinking buddy Chickenfoot (Paul Hurst). Bean holds the trial at his saloon and not only convicts the drifter but also sentences him to hang. Harden, however, tells Bean that he has a lock of hair belonging to an English actress whom Bean is obsessed with, and that he'll send for it via mail back in El Paso. This buys Harden just enough time to kill the supposed real horse thief, who suddenly rides into town.

From there, Harden and Bean fall into a precarious friendship with each other. Harden reminds Bean of himself when he was a tricky and manipulative youngster, while Harden sees a somewhat charming, well-meaning man underneath his ruthless exterior.

Things become complicated when Harden meets some of the homesteaders, consisting of Wade Harper (Forrest Tucker), old-timer Caliphet Mathews (Fred Stone), and his daughter Jane Ellen (Doris Davenport). Jane Ellen charms Harden into staying a little longer before leaving for California, his ultimate destination.

But the next day, Harden discovers a plot that entails Wade leading a group of men into Vinegaroon in order to mete out their own justice. They're determined to lynch Judge Bean as revenge for killing their homesteader friend the previous day.

The stage is set for a showdown between the two groups: the local cattlemen, who believe that they should be able to herd their cattle across the open range, and the homesteaders who prefer to fence things off as boundaries of their property.

A Golden-Age Western With Laughs

This film is one of the funniest Westerns I've ever seen (probably the funniest), despite the literal gallows humor about the homesteader who is hanged at the start of the film. The back and forth between Bean and Harden as the two try to out-wit one another is hilarious and reveals how versatile both Brennan (who won an Oscar for the role) and Cooper were as actors. You have to see their subtle eye movements and gestures to know what I'm talking about.

There are oddball characters aplenty. These include the town's boozier and gambler Chickenfoot, and its matter-of-fact undertaker Mort Borrow (Charles Halton), who takes body measurements of suspects before they've even been convicted and hanged.

After watching many serious Westerns by directors such as the great John Ford and Sam Peckinpah, I found this film to be a breath of fresh laughter mixed in with the unfolding drama that its unique characters engage in—all of whom seem believable.

Indeed, Vinegaroon is based on the real town of Langtry, Texas—a place that the real-life Judge Roy Bean bought and was later appointed as judge for the entire surrounding territory. "The Westerner" is likewise smack-dab in must-watch territory.

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

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—IMDB REVIEWER

**INTERVIEW
WITH THE ANTICHRIST**