WEEK 2, 2022

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS& CULTURE

THE NORTON SIMON FOUNDATION

At the Norton Simon Museum: "Saint Joseph Embracing the Infant Christ," circa 1670–85, by Giovanni Battista Gaulli, commonly known as Baciccio. Oil on canvas; 50 inches by 38 1/4 inches.

FINE ARTS

Traditional Art Has Stories to Tell

US winter exhibitions to warm the soul

LORRAINE FERRIER

"[T]rue painting is such as not only surprises, but as it were, calls to us; and has so powerful an effect, that we cannot help coming near it, as if it had something to tell us," wrote French art critic Roger de Piles in his "Principles of Painting" (1708).

Traditional art speaks to our souls—with subjects that gently guide or chastise us—while always offering us ways to become better versions of ourselves.

Across the country, there are some fascinating winter exhibitions that hold the qualities of traditional art dear. These artworks draw us in, like a warm hearth on a chilly day for, as de Piles suggested, they have stories to tell.

The subjects were expressly chosen to educate, spark devotion, and impart or strengthen morals.

Art With Purpose

Faith and paternal love tenderly play out in the painting "Saint Joseph Embracing the Infant Christ" by Giovanni Battista Gaulli (commonly known as Baciccio). Joseph lovingly gazes down at his son, who is trying to tug at his father's curly beard. It's an endearing, universal scene designed to tug at our heart strings, as empathy pulls us into the picture. Yet Baciccio's painting moves us beyond the earthly father-son bond by depicting a glowing halo emanating from the Christ Child, elevating us and the painting to a higher realm.

The Madonna and Child are more commonly depicted than Joseph and the Christ Child. But artworks of both subjects were made for the same reason—to aid contemplation and prayer in secular or religious settings.

*Continued on **Page 4***

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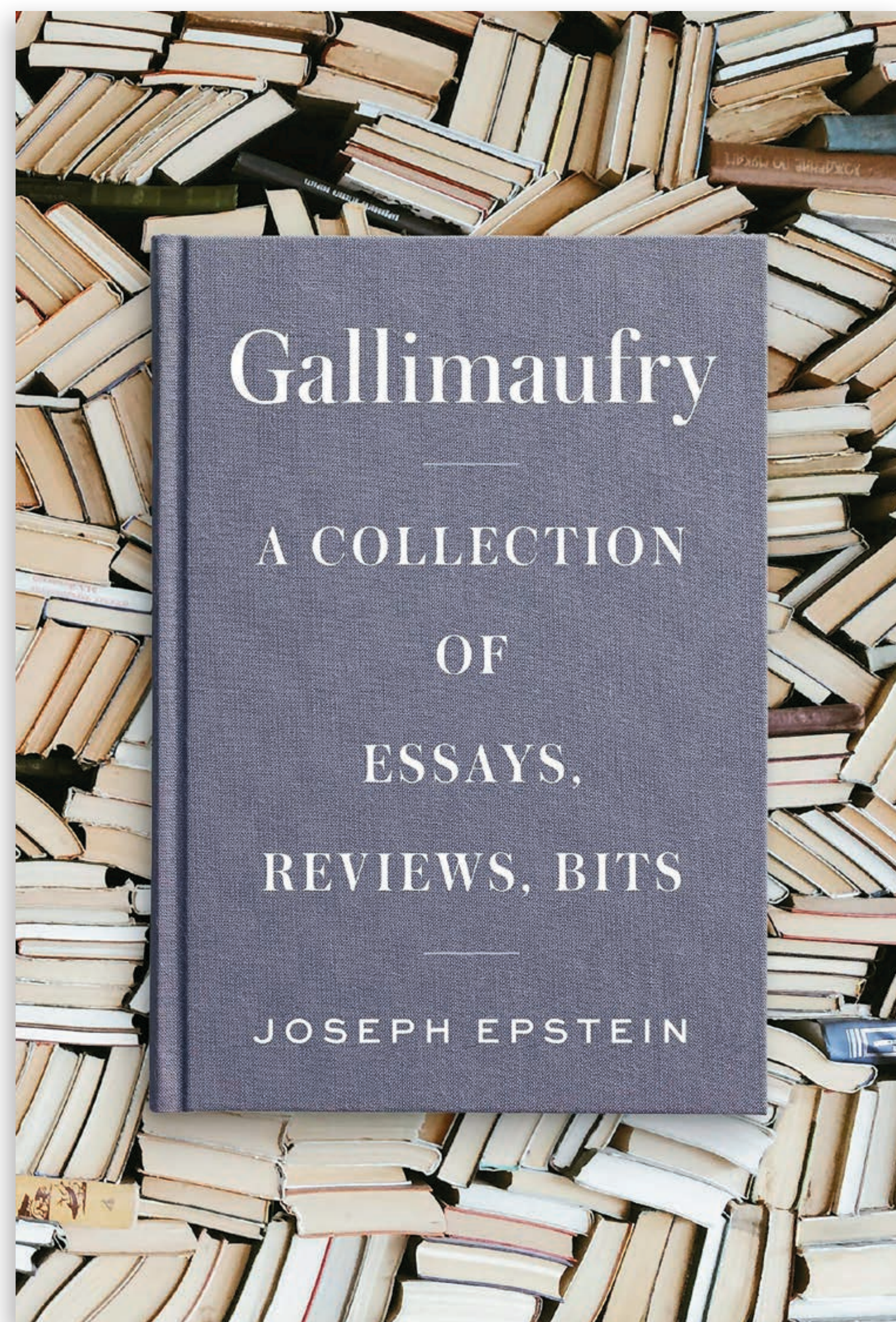
TRUTH AND TRADITION



The cover of Joseph Epstein's latest collection of essays.

LITERATURE

Dazzled by the World: A Master of the Essay

As Joseph Epstein sees the world

JEFF MINICK

Ask someone for the title or author of a favorite book, and most could give you an answer.

Ask the same question about a favorite poem or poet, and some might come up with a reply. Even a 5-year-old might recite "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Ask about a favorite essayist, and the responses would likely be on the slim side.

Those who have read and admired such writers might mention past luminaries like Ralph Waldo Emerson, E.B. White, Joseph Mitchell, or the recently deceased Joan Didion. Others might bring up contemporary authors such as Theodore Dalrymple, Marilynne Robinson, Victor Davis Hanson, or names from a battalion of pundits that can be found online.

Many essays, particularly those published for consumption on our screens or in our daily papers, such as the one you are reading, are ephemeral: read today and unremembered tomorrow. Some are obliterated because of the topic and the timing, such as a piece on Afghanistan or even on Omicron. Written in haste because of some deadline or time-sensitive issue, other articles may give us some beneficial information but lack the style to stick with us.

Not so, however, for essayist Joseph Epstein.

A Mini-Biography

Born in 1937 in Chicago, Joseph Epstein has spent more than half a century writing essays, books of nonfiction, and short stories. Though indifferent to literature during his early education, Epstein fell under the spell of books and writers at the University of Chicago. Later, he became a lecturer at Northwestern University, where for almost 30 years he taught literature and composition. From 1975 to 1997, he was also the editor of The American Scholar, the Phi Beta Kappa magazine.

In 2003, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded him its medal for his contributions to the art of the essay. The NEH citation notes that Epstein "has taken on subjects that range from the joys of owning a cat to the art of napping to thoughts on aging and the changing times."

Detractors

Not everyone is an Epstein fan. Visit his books on Amazon, and you'll find that some reviewers mark him down as acerbic, snarky, or pretentious. For example, his latest collection, "Gallimaufry: A Collection of Essays, Reviews, Bits," received many high-end compliments, but was also slammed with a few one-star reviews and comments such as "Absolute drivel ... Barely worth use as kindling" and "Self-important, sexist and droll."

One of these negative reviewers writes under the tag of "kiddo," no doubt referencing Epstein's December 2020 Wall Street Journal essay titled "Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not If You Need an M.D." Here, Epstein poked fun at first lady Jill Biden for referring to herself as Dr. Biden on account of her Ph.D. in education, and in the same article he addressed her once as "kiddo." The essay caused a storm of controversy for a few weeks and resulted in his being labeled by some culture warriors as a misogynist. Given the lack of any details about "Gallimaufry" in the Amazon attacks on Epstein, we can likely conclude that these reviews were not delivered by readers of his essays but by people still angered by his piece on Jill Biden.

And then there are those of us who shout our admiration for Epstein's essays from the rooftops of literature.

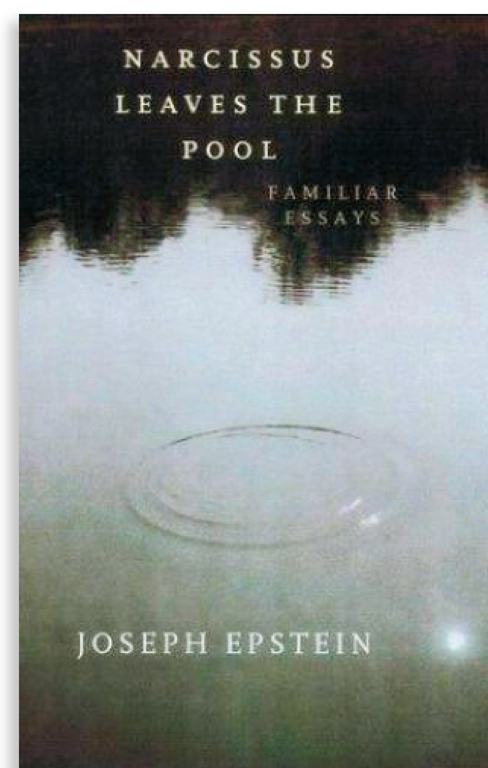
Where to Begin?

On my shelves are six different collections of Epstein's essays. I've read several more, plus his full-length books on snobbery and friendship. The essays may be divided into two broad categories: literary and familiar. In the latter group, the author covers topics ranging from baseball to clothing styles, from written portraits of old friends to his schooling days.

For those who have never encountered Epstein, I'd recommend starting with "Wind Sprints," his collection of shorter essays, most of which appeared in The Weekly Standard magazine. In "Wind Sprints" we find pieces, generally 800 to 1,000 words apiece, on such topics as multitasking, a requiem for his postman, comic books and newspaper cartoons, and trying to sleep in old age.

These short essays allow readers to enjoy a few minutes daily visiting the book, reading a couple of articles, and then putting "Wind Sprints" aside for later perusal and pleasures. It's also a "dipper" book, meaning that readers can jump in and out of the chapters wherever they feel inclined.

And like Epstein's other works, we find other treasures here besides the topics: the author's eye for detail, his erudition, the rich prose style, humor, and wisdom.



In one essay in this collection, Epstein considers wearing an ascot.

An Example

In "No Opinion," a 2003 article in "Wind Sprints" particularly apt for our own time when opinions often trample truth, Epstein displays his broad cultural knowledge by weaving into his prose mentions of philosopher Michael Oakeshott, novelists V.S. Naipaul and Thomas Pynchon, the Modern Language Association and the Women's National Basketball Association, his beloved friend and literary man Edward Shils, French poet Paul Valéry, and Republican politics. (I've left out a few other references to save space.)

The combination of so many ingredients in under three pages makes for a rich and nutritious prose soup.

Here's a sample of that dish. In the opening paragraph, Epstein relates an incident in which Oakeshott comments on what he thought of England's place in the European Union: "I don't see that I am required to have an opinion on that." Epstein then writes:

"I found that response very helpful, for more and more things crop up on which I, too, feel having an opinion is unnecessary. Especially has this become so in the realm of popular culture. On the movie "The Matrix" and its sequel, for example, I have no need to weigh in with a penetrating, or even banal, insight. This is a subject best left to those pop-culture punditi who specialize in being ten minutes ahead of the With-It Express."

That paragraph with its wordplay and its confession of the self is vintage Epstein and also commonplace, meaning that his prose sparkles throughout his paragraphs.

> We see Epstein's wisdom as a connoisseur of literature.

Another Example

In "Will You Still Feed Me?" found in "Narcissus Leaves the Pool: Familiar Essays," we find a meditation by a 60-year-old Epstein on aging. He mentions buying an ascot in Italy—"brilliant blue, niftily splashed with red, and flecked with gold"—and wonders at what age he might appropriately wear this scarf. He concludes:

"Yes, at seventy, if I get there—I have just touched wood—I shall be ascotted and ready to roll. You will see me coming. You won't be able to miss me. I shall be this old dandy, Italian silk at his throat, looking a bit distracted, because he is still thinking of the future while living in the past—and wondering where all the time has gone."

Those of us who have reached our three score and ten often find ourselves wondering the same thing.

Lit Wit

In his collections of essays devoted to literature and the writing life, Epstein also shines. Though I've only read one novel and a short story by Henry James, for example, Epstein's analysis of this writer made me wish I had paid James greater attention.

In "Gallimaufry," he casts light on all sorts of writers, many of whom I've never read. Stefan Zweig, Isaiah Berlin, Diderot, and others: I know the names, but not their work. His review of the works of Vasily Grossman, who wrote of Stalinist Russia and World War II, made me want to grab that man's books and settle into the nearest sofa, though my stack of volumes shouting to be read at this point will likely prevent that meeting anytime in the near future.

In this same collection are reviews of writers who are known to me, authors like Evelyn Waugh, Nelson Algren, P.G. Wodehouse, and Tom Wolfe. Epstein's praise and criticism of these novelists strike me as judicious and on target. In this passage, for instance, he first quotes Wodehouse and then adds an approving comment: "'I'm all for strewing a little happiness as I go by,' Wodehouse once wrote to William Townsend, and he did so with ample measure."

We see his wisdom as a connoisseur of literature in his discussion of Waugh's religious faith. Epstein, a self-described "village agnostic," defends Waugh's Catholicism and astutely observes: "This drama of faith, Waugh's ultimate object, went directly against the grain of a secular age, but in taking it up in his novels Evelyn Waugh, the brilliant humorist, became a major writer."

Love and Work

In his Introduction to his 2014 collection, "A Literary Education," Joseph Epstein writes: "An essayist is an amateur, in two primary senses of the word. He is, first, distinctly not an expert, and he is, second, a lover. Unlike the critic, or even the novelist or poet, there is nothing professional about the essayist. He comes to the world dazzled by it. The riches it offers him are inexhaustible. Subjects on which he may scribble away are everywhere."

Over his long lifetime of writing, Epstein has shared those riches with the rest of us. The subjects on which he has scribbled away have brought devoted readers delight and deep thoughts, and an unceasing admiration for the pleasures given us by his prose.

At the end of "A Literary Education," Epstein composed a remembrance of Hilton Kramer, an art critic, one of the founders of The New Criterion magazine, and a writer who frequently took to task postmodernism and political correctness. In the final sentence of this piece, Epstein wrote of his friend, "He is irreplaceable."

So are you, Mr. Epstein. So are you.

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.

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JAMIE STUKENBERG/COURTESY OF THE CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: “Our Lady of Cocharcas,” 1751, by an unidentified Peruvian workshop. Oil and gold on canvas; 49 7/8 inches by 41 1/8 inches. Collection of Carl & Marilynn Thoma.

FINE ARTS

Traditional Art Has Stories to Tell

US winter exhibitions to warm the soul

*Continued from **Page 1***

Baciccio’s painting is one of over 60 paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures in “The Expressive Body: Memory, Devotion, Desire (1420–1750)” exhibition at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California. All works are from the museum’s collection, and many are on view for the first time.

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: “Head of the Virgin,” circa 1700–1725, by Giuseppe Mazza; marble. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Pierson in memory of Mrs. Daisy C. Kahmann; Van Ackeren Collection of Religious Art, Greenlease Gallery, Rockhurst University.

GABE HOPKINS/COURTESY OF THE NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

As art lovers today, we view the vast majority of artworks in museums and art galleries in artificial constructs behind rope or glass—far from the artists’ original intentions.

This exhibition explores how people once interacted with artworks showing the human figure. These works were once displayed in homes, churches, and art collectors’ cabinets, and the subjects were expressly chosen to educate, spark devotion, and impart or strengthen morals.

Viewers intimately experienced the art. Collectors directly handled prints and caressed sculptures in appreciation—as the patina (a greenish layer caused by the object’s being handled or exposed to the elements) on a bronze Venus attests to in the exhibition. Couples wishing to conceive were encouraged to gaze at paintings of beautiful lovers in order to be blessed with healthy children. The devout used images and sculptures to meditate on the suffering of martyrs, to bring out compassion, to deepen their faith, and to bring them closer to God.

Divine Traditions

“The use of devotional objects as conduits for spiritual support is still a living tradition, and a thread that connects across many beliefs and value systems,” curator Aimee Marcereau DeGalan said in a press release. Marcereau DeGalan is the Louis L. and Adelaide C. Ward senior curator of European arts at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

Nine paintings and sculptures—from 1400 to the 1730s—are currently on display at the museum in the “Objects of Devotion: Highlights From Rockhurst University’s Van Ackeren Collection of Religious Art” exhibition.

The small display demonstrates the different ways that Christians used and continue to use artworks to guide and deepen their faith.

Through religious paintings and sculptures, artists of the past could effectively convey sacred truths to a largely illiterate population. They did this by imbuing the art with realistic emotions, a practice that was established in Western Europe as far back as 1300. Viewers moved by the works might have gained spiritual insights that brought them closer to God.

Believers used the images, steeped in religious symbols, to venerate the saints, entrusting their woes and joys to them.

In the exhibition is a standing female saint believed to be carved in limewood. It’s unclear which saint the 15th-century German statue depicts, as any symbols suggesting her identity are missing. She holds out her empty left hand that once would have hinted at her identity. For instance, St. Catherine would have held a book, and St. Barbara would have held a sword or chalice, explains the carving’s title card.

An awe-struck Mary holds her breath as she gazes up to God in Peter Strudel’s sublime marble sculpture titled “Immaculate Conception.” The divine sculpture shows the moment when Christians believe God created Mary free from original sin.

Strudel’s Mary moves us instantly because he made her gesture relatable; who hasn’t held their breath and chest when aghast? Yet Strudel used Christian symbols to convey that this is certainly not an earthly scene. Mary stands on a heavenly sphere crushing a serpent carrying an apple. The serpent warns us that right from birth people are tempted to sin. Mary however, by her very virtue, demonstrates that sin can be conquered by pure faith. At her feet, joyous putti celebrate her miraculous arrival.

The title card next to the sculpture states that by the 1600s, artists had set symbols to represent core Christian concepts. For instance, art depicting the Immaculate Conception would show Mary holding her chest in awe or clasping her hands in prayer. The crescent moon (as seen in Strudel’s sculpture) or a crown of stars (as seen in paintings by Rubens and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo) indicates the sun, because Christians believe Mary to have been clothed by the sun, with the moon at her feet.

Sacred Art From the Spanish Americas

Divine art is also the focus of another exhibition at the museum, which opens in February. Fifteen Hispanic paintings from Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador feature in the exhibition titled “The Nelson-Atkins Paintings From the Spanish Americas: The Thoma Collection.” Created under Spanish rule, the paintings encourage leisure, prayer, or contemplation.

Of the European empires, the Spanish empire was one of the largest and longest lasting. For nearly 500 years, Spain ruled a vast realm stretching from South Asia to South America.

The Spanish colonization of Latin America began in 1535 when present-day Mexico, Central America, and parts of the Southern United States became the viceroyalty of New Spain. In 1542, South America (except Brazil and the far south) became the viceroyalty of Peru.

European artists made the arduous journey across the Atlantic Ocean to create religious art for homes, convents, and churches throughout Latin America.

By the 17th century, South American artists had developed a unique Hispanic style of art, influenced by visiting Italian artists and by copying and adapting art imported from Europe. By the 18th century, regional schools and art academies fulfilled prestigious religious and secular commissions.

> **The use of devotional objects as conduits for spiritual support is still a living tradition.**
>
> *Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, curator, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*

For instance, in the painting “Our Lady of Cocharcas,”an unknown Peruvian artist vividly depicted an Andean pilgrim procession. The composition is filled with colorfully clothed pilgrims making the high mountain trek to pay homage to the Virgin.

The style and palette is almost reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s jovial peasant paintings.

Dominating the center of the painting is the Virgin Mary, a reminder for Catholics to place her at the center of their life. In her hand she holds a statue of Our Lady of Copacabana, a symbol of how the pilgrimage to Cocharcas began in the 16th century.

According to legend, a Catholic novice who lived in the Cocharcas area was guided by his Jesuit sponsor to take a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Copacabana on the shores of Lake Titicaca to heal an injury. While on the way to the shrine, he found that all his symptoms disappeared. Vowing to serve the Virgin for the rest of his life, he took a small copy of the statue of Our Lady of Copacabana back to Cocharcas, and he along with the Jesuits installed the statue in the small 17th-century church.

The exhibitions highlighted here feature art created up to some 600 years ago, in the 15th century. Yet, the messages conveyed in those traditional artworks transcend time and language, as they rely on universal human experience. By appreciating traditional art, we are ultimately connecting with this inherent ancestral heritage that cherished goodness for all. Now, that’s something worth telling.

“The Expressive Body: Memory, Devotion, Desire (1440–1750)” exhibition at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, Calif. runs until March 7.
To find out more, visit NortonSimon.org

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., the “Objects of Devotion: Highlights From Rockhurst University’s Van Ackeren Collection of Religious Art” exhibition runs until June 17; and the “Paintings From the Spanish Americas: The Thoma Collection” exhibition opens on Feb. 12 and runs until Sept. 4.
To find out more, visit Nelson-Atkins.org

JAMIE STUKENBERG/COURTESY OF THE CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: “Our Lady of Monguí,” 17th century (gold embellishment added 18th century), by an unidentified Colombian artist. Oil and gold on panel; 12 11/16 inches by 10 3/16 inches. Collection of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation.

THE NORTON SIMON FOUNDATION

At the Norton Simon Museum: “Virgin and Child With Four Angels and Two Cherubim,” circa 1470–75, by Francesco Botticini. Tempera on panel; 25 3/4 inches by 19 1/2 inches.

GABE HOPKINS/COURTESY OF THE NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: “Standing Female Saint,” circa 1450–1460, by anonymous; possibly limewood. Gift of Robert C. Greenlease Family; Van Ackeren Collection of Religious Art, Greenlease Gallery, Rockhurst University.

JAMIE STUKENBERG/COURTESY OF THE CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: “Saint Michael the Archangel,” late 17th–18th century, by an unidentified, possibly Bolivian artist. Oil on canvas; 67 1/8 inches by 38 7/8 inches. Collection of Carl & Marilynn Thoma.

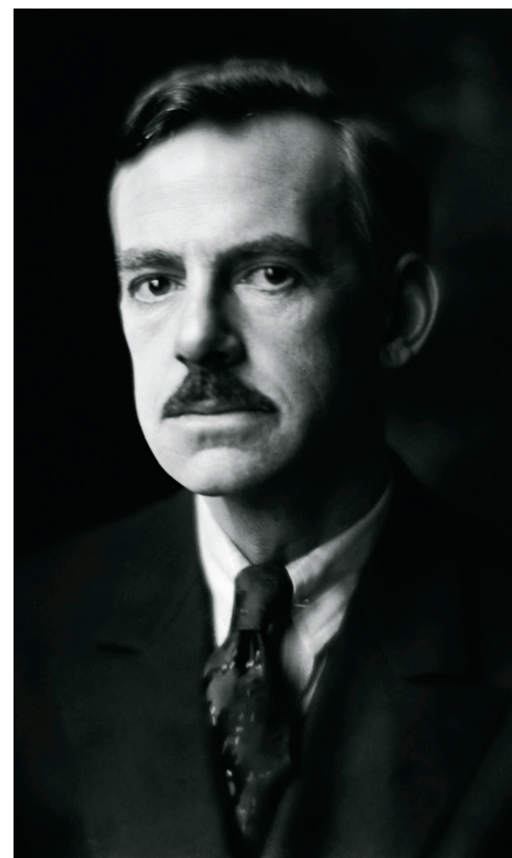
GABE HOPKINS/COURTESY OF THE NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: “Immaculate Conception,” circa 1700, by Peter Strudel; marble. Gift of Robert C. Greenlease Family; Van Ackeren Collection of Religious Art, Greenlease Gallery, Rockhurst University.

EMBASSY PICTURES

The 1962 film version of "Long Day's Journey Into Night" stars (L–R) Dean Stockwell as Edmund, Ralph Richardson as James, and Jason Robards as Jamie Tyrone.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



A photographic portrait of Eugene O'Neill by Alice Boughton. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

THEATER

'Long Day's Journey Into Night': A Masterpiece of Natural Theater

ROBERT COOPERMAN

How very fortunate we are that American playwright Eugene O'Neill's widow, Carlotta Monterey, disregarded the wishes of her late husband and had "Long Day's Journey Into Night" published in 1956, just three years after his death and not the 25 years that O'Neill himself requested. It means we had the pleasure of arguably America's greatest tragedy for many more years than the playwright anticipated.

O'Neill's masterpiece tells the story of his real family, whom he casts as the Tyrones—his actor father (James), drug-addicted mother (Mary), reckless older brother (Jamie), and gravely ill O'Neill himself (Edmund)—over the course of one day, sunrise to midnight, in August 1912.

Over the course of four acts, we watch them bicker, drink heavily, fight, and suffer as a steady fog literally closes in on them in their Connecticut cottage. By the end of the play, they remain in anguish over their failures, missteps, a deceased baby brother, and the renewed drug addiction of Mary. Even given some poetic license (O'Neill's real mother, Ella, overcame her addiction), O'Neill presents a bleak picture of his family and questions the ability of human beings to succeed in life.

In addition to being riveting theater, the play is a prime example of what Natural Theater is all about. This may be why the play continues to resonate with American audiences (to say nothing of international audiences).

Natural Theater

Natural Theater is a movement that builds on the philosophy of our nation's founding, in that all people are free to pursue their lives in accordance with the Natural Rights given to them by Nature's God. Such pursuits inevitably lead to conflict. Translated for the theater, this means that characters of the Natural Theater encounter conflict, not because they are victims of an unjust society but because they have contributed to this conflict through their own actions (defined by reason, as the Founders outlined).

Ultimately, however, despite setbacks and suffering, the plays of the Natural Theater remain hopeful, forgiving, and redemptive. Human nature, therefore, becomes both the cause and the resolution of drama.

What might one think of when reading or viewing "Long Day's Journey"? No doubt, one image that comes to mind is the horrifying ending where an aged and bitter James Tyrone; his wastrel son, Jamie, passed out on a couch; and his dying son, Edmund, looking aimlessly at a fogged-out horizon, watch their dear wife and mother descend the steps holding her wedding gown in a drug-induced stupor. The message that such an image offers is one of unabated misery—seemingly the very antithesis of the Natural Theater.

But look again.

Recognizing One's Mistakes

We cheapen O'Neill's message by concluding that the play's ending is a microcosm of the state of the world and the inevitable fate of human endeavors. Instead, is it a cautionary tale of poor choices and their consequences. Rather than depress, it teaches. And while it may appear hopeless, it nonetheless offers meaning by exploring the human condition and the issue of God-given reason (what our Founders called Natural Rights).

From this perspective, the play is all about the individual choices that one makes in life and as such focuses on the failings of the individual—not of society or the cosmos—as the cause for conflict. The play, then, is a four-act confessional where the Tyrones lament their failures, ultimately placing blame on themselves while the outside world—never presented as absurd or predatory—closes in on them. The approaching fog becomes all the more important as it, too, closes in on the Tyrones, leaving them alone together to face the consequences of their choices.

The fact that the Tyrones attribute their failures to themselves serves two purposes: First, it puts the fault squarely on their shoulders, which from a Natural Theater perspective gives them an air of dignity; second, it creates an environment for the audience members that allows them to feel empathy for the Tyrones without the notion that somehow external forces are to blame for their misfortune.

James Tyrone's speech to his son Edmund is a case in point. It occurs in Act 4, when James talks at length about his career and how he was enticed by the steady salary of appearing in that play that ruined him "with its promise of an easy fortune." By the end of the speech, he realizes it wasn't the play that destroyed his once-promising career, but his own choices: "What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder." He punctuates this a few moments later by quoting his beloved Shakespeare: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings."

In the same conversation, Edmund relates his desire to be at one with the sea and to find meaning and "ecstatic freedom" by losing himself in nature. Realizing his limitations as a human being, Edmund admits that he will "always be a stranger who never feels at home," ultimately realizing that even his speech cannot convey the meaning he wants it to: "Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people," he concludes famously.

What we have here in James and Edmund are two characters who understand their culpability in the circumstances of their lives. As a result, we can empathize and understand and yet distance ourselves from condemning all of humanity because of the life choices of two men.

But what of the remaining Tyrones, Jamie and Mary? Do they blame themselves in any way? For Jamie, the answer is "yes." In the final act of the play, he confesses to his younger brother that he has purposefully steered him in the wrong direction:

"Did it on purpose to make a bum of you. ... My putting you wise so you'd learn from my mistakes. Believed that myself at times, but it's fake. Made my mistakes look good. Wanted you to fail."

Jamie's honest appraisal of himself—and his confession of true love for his brother—lends him a dignity that his drunkenness and wanton ways would not normally allow. One could conceivably imagine a modern-day Jamie Tyrone blaming his failures on external forces such as fate, "the system," oppression, or a Godless universe. O'Neill's Jamie will have none of it; he is to blame: "I've been a rotten bad influence," he tells Edmund.

The world is not a hostile place in 'Long Day's Journey Into Night.' It is not a bleak, Beckettian landscape.

Mary Tyrone seemingly is the one character who fails to see herself as a victim of her own doing; indeed, she often blames James for the predicament she is in, living in a house that she says has never been a home. And yet, in her final scene—where she enters in a haze brought on by morphine—she is painfully aware that she has made the wrong decisions in life, particularly giving up on her desire to be a nun. With this confession, Mary closes the circle on the four of them, condemned not by a world that doesn't understand them but by their own actions.

A Cautionary Tale

In fact, the world outside the Tyrone home seems well-functioning. The only outsider is the housekeeper, Cathleen, used sparingly and mostly as comic relief. Other townspeople are mentioned: McGuire, who talks cigars and real estate with James; Shaughnessy, James's tenant farmer; Captain Turner, who chats with James as he's gardening; Dr. Hardy, Edmund's physician. These people are merely described by the Tyrones, for O'Neill never presents them as flesh-and-blood characters.

James, in particular, finds fault with all of them. (Shaughnessy is a "wily Shanty Mick," and Captain Turner a gabber.) And yet, there's no indication that these townspeople—or any outside force—are at the core of Tyrone misfortune, although James would like us to think it is they who are at fault for some of his poor decisions.

Thus, the "four haunted Tyrones" (as O'Neill described them in his dedication of the play) come to grips with themselves in the only way they know how: through despair, alcohol, and drugs. Nevertheless, they have laid bare their failings and found themselves wanting, with the fog enveloping them into silence. Their world is a sad state of affairs, but it is their world only. The rest of us are comfortably outside, watching with pity but unscathed. O'Neill does not implicate his audience in the misery of the Tyrones; he merely presents the consequences of lives spent in defiance of their natural gifts as human beings.

The world is not a hostile place in "Long Day's Journey Into Night." It is not a bleak, Beckettian landscape. And while the Tyrones and Beckett's "Godot" tramps all stare before them, motionless, as their respective plays conclude, one gets the sense that the Tyrones are not representing the fate of all humanity but rather of a particular household. Beckett, on the other hand, seems to condemn us all to a world of pain and loss, softened somewhat by the relationships we forge with those who share existence with us.

In our own time, when taking responsibility for our despair is no longer in fashion, we can better see that it is precisely because O'Neill's vision centers on the individual who shares the blame and the glory for his or her humanity that makes "Long Day's Journey Into Night" a Natural Theater masterpiece.

Robert Cooperman is the founder of Stage Right Theatrics, a theater company dedicated to the preservation of the founders' vision through the arts. Originally from Queens, N.Y., he now lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he earned his doctorate at The Ohio State University.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Katharine Hepburn as Mary Tyrone in the 1962 film of the play.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Eugene O'Neill's "A Long Day's Journey Into Night" is considered an autobiographical play. Eugene O'Neill's father, James, is James Tyrone in the play. In life, he was an actor. Here he's in the role of Abbé Busoni in "Monte Cristo."

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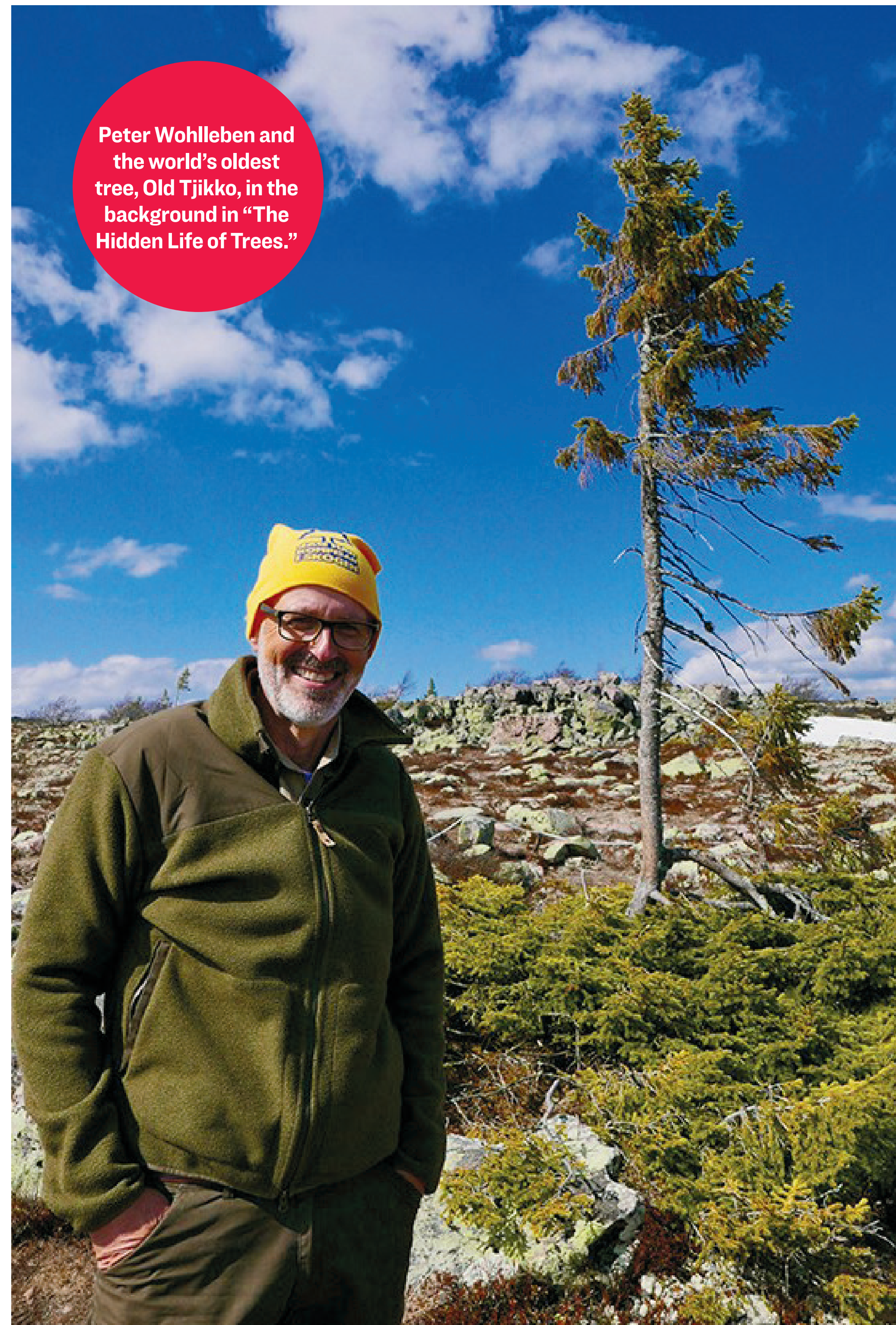

Peter Wohlleben and the world's oldest tree, Old Tjikko, in the background in "The Hidden Life of Trees."

The occurrence of fall foliage is much more complicated than we think.

Old-growth forest is being threatened by logging.

Deer looking for acorns pose a limited threat to tree propagation.

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.

The Science of the Ents

MARK JACKSON

Based on German conservationist and author Peter Wohlleben's 2015 bestselling book of the same title, the slow-paced but info-packed "The Hidden Life of Trees" very quickly makes one thing abundantly clear: J.R.R. Tolkien got it right. Trees are basically Ents.

Wohlleben himself is the main subject of the film. Presenting us with his biological, ecological, and academic expertise that's grounded in a deep, Teutonic matter-of-factness, former forester Wohlleben explains that trees are sentient beings. They talk to each other, share nutrients through their intertwined canopies and root systems, have complicated social networks, take care of and feed their kids (seedlings and infant trees) with liquid sugar, and outwit pesky insect infestations by, for example, timing their blossoming to produce bumper crops that will outstrip the local fauna's ability to gobble up all their seeds.

Some species can protect themselves from burrowing insects; most trees use fungi as a "wood-wide web"—basically an Ent-Internet. Trees feel pain from saw cuts and insect mandibles, but can heal themselves over time—sloooowly.

All this reminded me of the American gypsy moth infestation of the mid-1970s, where mass human hysteria set in due to the hordes of crawly, web-spinning caterpillars everywhere, with people thinking that their forests and well-appointed backyards were history. Scientists, however, revealed that trees had responded by simply putting out more tannic acid in their leaves the next summer, causing the moth-mischief to implode.

German conservationist Peter Wohlleben presents us with his biological, ecological, and academic expertise.

Mushrooms and many forms of fungi are used by trees as a form of computer network.

All this tree culture, naturally, takes centuries—millennia even—to establish, but trees in the past had lots of time to do their thing. Along came humans, who eventually started using the world's wood for heating homes, fires for cooking, and so on—sort of like another critter infestation. Except humans are the world's most effective, unstoppable predatory species in every regard and the trees don't stand a chance.

This hits home when we witness a "tree feller" in action—those mechanized megasaws on the end of backhoe-type arms that cut down, strip, and section trees into logs with an efficiency that turns the stomach in a similar fashion to witnessing the efficient machines utilized in livestock slaughterhouses. Sawdust is easier to deal with than blood, but there's something wanton, revolting, and horrendously disrespectful in the split-second destruction of a life-form that stood and witnessed life around it for centuries.

Interacting tree branch systems.

Woodlore

The directors follow Wohlleben around, filming him lecturing to students of conservation, being a television guest, and leading a show-and-tell nature walk with a Korean group. He explains in detail why the flora monoculture foisted by logging plantations upon forest areas is unhealthy, and why clear-cutting destroys the potential of young trees: They start growing too fast, and a healthy tree is a slow-growing tree.

He also explains how the sheer tonnage of heavy foresting machinery devastatingly and irreversibly compacts minuscule life-forms down to eight inches beneath the soil surface. And while that information does not particularly surprise, the fact that this action causes such destruction that it will take until the next ice age to undo it, and that it cuts trees off from water, does. Wohlleben describes what a real forest is, and does, and why preserving the world's forests is absolutely vital to the planet.

We get to see "Old Tjikko," at almost 10,000 years—the world's oldest tree. Old Tjikko stands alone in a field in Sweden, surrounded by an unseen, massive root system. It's been around since the Ice Age. It's seen Vikings, maybe even saw the Norse all-father god Odin ride his eight-legged steed across the night sky. It's seen blood and wars and the rise and fall of civilizations. Tolkien was probably aware of its existence. Maybe it's the inspiration for Treebeard.

The Trees Go—We Go

There are photos of smoke and flames, and statistics about British Columbia's wildfires. The magnitude of the damage is staggering. While the concept of climate crisis is still controversial, our need to preserve old and slow-growth forests is not.

The film is an uncritical adaptation of Wohlleben's book and doesn't deal with controversy over his approach, which some biologists feel is a bit woo-woo and anthropomorphizes the science. However, this criticism is just a prolonged state of ostrich-head-in-the-sand obstinance. Rigorous scientific research by top-notch botanists has been going on for decades and has scientifically proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, with all the required science boxes ticked, that plants are sentient beings with sensory organs and emotions.

Overall, while the pacing is sometimes not ideal in terms of allowing for the absorption of large amounts of information by viewers (the result of which is that it's easy for some facts to slip by), if you're a "Lord of the Rings" fan, you might enjoy this movie. It will enhance your appreciation of the scene where, during the Ent gathering, Merry is pulling his hobbit hair out with impatience. After waiting all day long, he thinks that the Ents have finally come up with a plan of action to deal with Saruman's treachery, but Treebeard tells him that the Ents have only just finished saying "good morning."

Trees are slooooooow, but very, very wise. Just as Ents are tree shepherds, humans, in their finest role and which has been demonstrated ad infinitum by "primitive" cultures the world over, are earth stewards. We need to get back to that, and quickly.

The film is in English and German languages, with subtitles.

'The Hidden Life of Trees' ('Das geheime Leben der Bäum')

Documentary

Directors:
Jörg Adolph, Jan Haft

Running Time:
1 hour, 40 minutes

MPAA Rating:
PG

Release Date:
Nov. 2, 2021 (United States)

★★★☆☆

ALL PHOTOS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

"Calumny of Apelles," circa 1496, by Sandro Botticelli. Tempera on panel; 24.4 inches by 35.8 inches. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

Remorse, in black, looks back at Truth, who points to heaven.

Two allegorical figures, Ignorance and Suspicion, whisper into King Midas's donkey ears.

Calumny, a woman dressed in white and blue, is led by the arm by Rancor, in black. She holds a torch in one hand and pulls an almost nude Apelles by the hair.

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Toward the Love of Divine Truth in the Age of Misinformation: 'Calumny of Apelles'

ERIC BESS

The information age has also brought about a massive amount of misinformation. There's so much available information that it's difficult to know what is true and what is false, and because of this, some of us might fall victim to what we call "fake news."

It's not only the media that spreads misinformation. A coworker, a friend, or even a family member does so, too. More specifically, someone may spread lies about us. How should we handle these circumstances? The painting "Calumny of Apelles" by Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli might offer us some insights.

Lucian's Apelles

Before we can interpret Botticelli's painting, it is necessary to know a little about what inspired it.

Botticelli was inspired by the story of the ancient Greek painter Apelles. Apelles was considered one of the greatest painters of his time. He was so great, in fact, that some of his contemporaries became jealous of him. One of these artists, Antiphilos, sought to ruin Apelles by telling King Ptolemy I that Apelles was involved in a conspiracy against him.

As a result, Apelles was thrown in jail and was nearly executed. Some accounts suggest that Apelles painted "Calumny" as an argument for his innocence, but it's unclear how he would have done this from prison. Others suggest that Apelles was freed after the real conspirators testified in favor of his innocence. Either way, Apelles painted "Calumny" because of the spread of misinformation.

One of the few known descriptions of Apelles's "Calumny" was offered by the Greek writer Lucian. Around 1,500 years later, Botticelli would come across Lucian's description of Apelles's painting and would try to recreate it himself from the description alone.

It appears that Botticelli painted for us the stages that occur when misinformation spreads.

Botticelli's 'Calumny of Apelles'

In "Calumny of Apelles," Botticelli reinterpreted Lucian's description of Apelles's painting. A group of 10 figures are painted in an environment of ornate, classical friezes depicting stories from Christianity and Greek mythology on columns that open out onto a calm seascape.

Instead of painting King Ptolemy as the arbiter of Apelles's fate, however, Botticelli painted King Midas. In Greek mythology, Apollo turned King Midas's ears into donkey's ears when King Midas suggested that Pan was a better musician than Apollo. And here, at the far right side of the composition, Botticelli painted King Midas with donkey's ears.

Two women hold up Midas's ears and whisper the lies about Apelles into them.

King Midas outstretches his hand toward Rancor, who is represented as a male figure in black clothing. With a furrowed brow, Rancor juts his fingers toward the eyes of King Midas as if to blind him.

Rancor leads Calumny, a woman dressed in white and blue, by the arm. She holds a torch in one hand and pulls an almost nude Apelles by the hair. Two women representing Fraud and Perfidy are adorning Calumny's hair with braids and flowers.

Behind these figures, dressed in black, is an older female figure called Remorse. She looks back at Truth, who points and looks up toward the heavens as she modestly covers herself.

The Stages of Misinformation

In order for us to come to an understanding of this painting and how to handle misinformation, it is first necessary to have a fuller understanding of what these figures represent.

The fact that King Midas has been substituted for King Ptolemy I colors the story considerably. It is no longer just a crime against one artist, Apelles, but also implicates Ptolemy in a sin against the divine. King Midas's inability to adequately judge the musical contest between Apollo and Pan suggests that he was either unwilling or unable to recognize divine truth and excellence. His presence in this painting may even symbolize resistance to divine truths.

The two women, Ignorance and Suspicion, whisper into King Midas's donkey ears—symbols of the divine retribution placed upon Midas for his inability to properly discern the divine. The fact that they hold up his donkey ears to whisper into them reiterates the ignorance and suspicion that King Midas used to judge divine truth. Midas's ignorance and suspicion cause him to judge poorly in both the contest between Apollo and Pan and here where Apelles's life is at stake.

Ignorance and suspicion of divine truths are the beginning of Midas's misinformation. Ignorance and suspicion also cause him to lean forward and point to the figure Rancor. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "rancor" suggests a long-standing feeling of resentment and animosity.

The fact that Rancor represents a long-standing feeling of resentment instead of a momentary lapse in judgment suggests several things. First, it suggests the power of our ignorance and suspicion in leading to and maintaining resentment and animosity over time.

Second, it suggests that this painting is about an attitude toward the divine that goes beyond the moment of Apelles's imprisonment; it suggests that this painting is about long-standing resentment and animosity toward divine truths.

Finally, Rancor's body language—the fact that his hand juts out toward Midas as if to attack his eyes or obscure his vision—also suggests that long-standing resentment and animosity can eventually make one blind with hatred toward the truth.

Rancor leads Calumny by the arm, which suggests that resentment and animosity are precursors to calumny. Calumny represents the malicious and false representation of something toward the aim of damaging its representation. Perfidy and Fraud beautify Calumny, which suggests that calumny must be beautified if its lies are to be believed.

Calumny also holds a torch in her hand. A torch typically represents illumination and knowledge; it represents the counterpart of ignorance. Here, however, Calumny's so-called illumination is not the counterpart of ignorance but supports ignorance. Her flame suggests that her falsehoods are mistaken for illuminating truths.

So far, it appears that Botticelli painted for us the stages that occur when misinformation spreads. First we are ignorant and suspicious of the truth, and not of any truth but of divine truths. Second, our ignorance and suspicion of the truth cause us to develop long-standing resentment and animosity toward divine truth, and this further blinds us from seeing the truth. Finally, with divine truth so fully obscured, we easily accept misinformation as if it were the truth.

Toward the Love of Truth

So what is truth according to Botticelli's painting? Botticelli painted two representations of truth: Apelles is the first, and the second is Truth herself. Apelles, like Truth, is almost completely bare. Every other figure in the painting is completely clothed, but Apelles and Truth are exposed, which lets us know that they are presenting themselves authentically and with integrity.

Also, Apelles places his hands in prayer. Despite the onslaught of lies around him, he doesn't plead with any of the other figures. He doesn't turn toward Calumny to extinguish her flame, nor does he bow at the feet of Midas to beg for his life. Instead, he prays, and this suggests that he recognizes an authentic truth beyond his immediate environment. It also suggests that the truth can't be found in this hubbub that is resistant to the divine but must be found in the divine itself.

Calumny pulls Apelles by the hair with her other hand. She pulls Apelles behind Rancor toward Midas to be judged. Of course, any judgment cast upon Apelles by Midas wouldn't be based on truth because Midas is surrounded by so many representations of falsehood and misinformation, and is himself a representation of someone misled and manipulated.

At the composition's far left side, Truth looks and points up to the heavens. As she is a representation of Truth, it seems that Botticelli has her point directly to where he believed truth dwells, which is with God in heaven. Despite everything that happens with Apelles below, the representation of Truth reminds him that actual Truth exists with the divine—beyond this onslaught of misinformation.

Remorse looks back at Truth as she slowly moves her way toward King Midas. We can presume that Remorse will make her way to the king at some point, when all the other figures have dispersed. With her focus on Truth, Remorse will expose the lies and misinformation, and confound Midas with remorse for falling victim to calumny. In the end, we presume, truth will prevail.

In the midst of so much misinformation, how might we turn to God to discern what is true and what is false? How might we align with truth despite the falsehoods we might have to endure? How can we learn to live with a love of divine truth?

Have you ever seen a work of art that you thought was beautiful but had no idea what it meant? In our series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart," we interpret the classical visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We try to approach each work of art to see how our historical creations might inspire within us our own innate goodness.

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

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AMERICAN TREASURES

The Man Behind That Grrrreat! Bass Voice

LIGHT RECORDS

Thurl Ravenscroft recorded an album called "Great Hymns in Story and Song" in 1970.

MICHAEL KUREK

Have you enjoyed the deliciously deep voice that sang "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch"? I began to wonder just who that singer was. It turns out to be the same man who, for over five decades, was the "Grrreat!" voice of Tony the Tiger!

The equally colorful name of this singer is Thurl Ravenscroft (1914–2005), and his many roles included the voiceover for the character Stewpot in "South Pacific." That's the sailor who works his way down to that incredibly low note on the line "There is absolutely nothing like the frame of a dame."

I don't know anyone who isn't fascinated when a true bass singer descends the scale to the bottom of his range. We can't wait to hear just how low he will finally go, until he satisfyingly arrives at a pitch even lower than we imagined. Singing groups such as barbershop quartets, gospel quartets, and country music vocal groups boast one singer with such a rich, bass range.

Thurl Ravenscroft did his share of singing in those kinds of groups, but he made his mark in the movies. It seems remarkable that his contributions in that field are so numerous and memorable, yet few seem to know his name.

Ravenscroft regularly made it down to the lowest G on the piano, which—for those familiar with the notes on the staff—is below the third ledger line under the bass clef. According to the New Grove Dictionary of Opera, that is yet a few steps lower than the typical lowest note in the "basso profundo" range. That technically qualifies Ravenscroft for the little-known and lowest subcategory of the bass voice, an oktavist.

I don't know anyone who isn't fascinated when a true bass singer descends the scale to the bottom of his range.

Oktavist singers are extremely rare but can be regularly found singing Russian Orthodox choral music. In a YouTube montage, the excerpts that Ravenscroft sings take him gradually down to that low G, with the pitch names shown on the screen. Worth mentioning, too, is the rich, slightly gravelly tone color of his voice that makes it sound so distinctive and sound even lower than it is.

Warm and Gentle Celebrity

The man himself was a beloved figure, known for a great sense of humor, gentlemanly courtesy, and a warm personality. He was married after only three weeks of meeting June Seamans and remained so for 53 years until her death in 1999. The couple had two children.

He was a devoted member of the Crystal Cathedral (now called Christ Cathedral) in Orange County, California, and is buried in the cathedral's Memorial Gardens. He often appeared on its weekly program, "Hour of Power," and in 1970 recorded an album called "Great Hymns in Story and Song" with arrangements by Ralph Carmichael. One of his dreams—to record a reading of the entire Bible—was never realized, probably because James Earl Jones did it first.

In his junior year at Norfolk High School (Nebraska, also the hometown of Johnny Carson), he sang the tenor lead in the school musical, but by his senior year, his voice had dropped enough to sing the bass lead. At 19, Ravenscroft set his sights on art and left Norfolk in 1933 to study at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Stewpot (center L) in the stage version of "South Pacific" from 1949. In the 1958 film version, Thurl Ravenscroft provided the voiceover for the character.

MOVIESTILLSDB

Thurl Ravenscroft was not credited for his singing in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!"

MOVIESTILLSDB

Ravenscroft did voiceovers for many animated films, including the voice of the whale in the 1940 Disney film "Pinocchio."

However, his distinctive voice ultimately provided much greater opportunity there, beginning with his membership in the male vocal quartets called The Mellomen and The Sportsmen, in the 1940s. With them, he sang on recordings with such stars as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Jo Stafford, Peggy Lee, and in recordings and films with Elvis Presley. He went on to sing in the chorus on 28 albums by the Johnny Mann Singers and backup on several solo recordings, like Rosemary Clooney's 1954 No. 1 hit, "This Ole House."

Ravenscroft spent five years, including all of World War II, as a navigator for courier flights with the U.S. Air Transport Command, transporting VIPs like Winston Churchill and Bob Hope across the Atlantic. At 6 feet 5 inches, he had been deemed too tall to fly a fighter plane.

Voice in Demand

After the war, he found work in both singing and speaking roles in animated shorts and feature films. These included the voice of Paul Bunyan, Captain the Horse in "One Hundred and One Dalmatians," the whale in "Pinocchio," and a variety of minor parts in "Dumbo," "Alice in Wonderland," "Peter Pan," "Lady and the Tramp," "Sleeping Beauty," "Winnie the Poo, "The Jungle Book," "The Aristocats," "Cinderella," "The Cat in the Hat," and "Snoopy Come Home."

His singing roles were not limited to animation but included live action films, too, sometimes onscreen and sometimes off. These included singing Burt Bacharach's song "South American Getaway" in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," the theme song for the John Wayne and Kirk Douglas Western "The War Wagon," dubbing a song for Fred Astaire in "Daddy Long Legs," and providing voices and sounds for both Andrew the Dog and a Banker (and also the animated character Hog the Pig) in "Mary Poppins."

The list of his many roles also includes spoken and singing voices for many animatronic puppets in theme park attractions. In addition to the voice of Tony the Tiger for Kellogg's, he also appeared onscreen as the Marlboro Man and in various beer commercials. Ravenscroft went off to a routine recording session in 1966 and sang through a few quick takes of "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch" for the soundtrack to "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" and then ran off to another job without thinking much about it, learning only later that it was to become a holiday classic.

It is no stretch to speculate that the sheer number of these roles has seared the voice of Thurl Ravenscroft in our collective consciousness, being associated with so many of our beloved memories. He was still performing Tony the Tiger when he was 90 years old in 2004, being picked up for his recording sessions by a limousine from the Kellogg Company. Two weeks after his death from prostate cancer the next year, Kellogg's ran a tribute to Ravenscroft in the magazine Advertising Age with this headline: "Behind every great character is an even greater man."

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

ICONIC FILMS

A Masterpiece of Taut Drama and Intense Acting

IAN KANE

As someone who was never impressed by courtroom dramas in films or on TV during his younger years, it's taken me awhile to warm up to them. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that a close relative used to binge-watch Perry Mason episodes ad nauseam—so much so, that I felt I could practically pass the bar by the time I was 16 years old.

However, after seeing such exceptional courtroom extravaganzas as 1982's "The Verdict" with Paul Newman and 1962's "To Kill a Mockingbird" with Gregory Peck (only this past year), I've come to appreciate the genre. And having recently watched the highly regarded courtroom drama from 1957 "12 Angry Men," I've been swayed even more.

ALL PHOTOS BY UNITED ARTISTS

Nine of the twelve jurors, in "12 Angry Men."

Juror 8 (Henry Fonda) isn't sure the case is closed.

But "courtroom drama" is a bit of a misnomer. You see, just as with the other aforementioned films, most of the action in "12 Angry Men" takes place outside of an actual courtroom. Instead, things play out near the conclusion of the legal process, as jurors have retired to the jury chamber to discuss the case's details and determine its outcome.

'12 Angry Men'

In this case (pun unintended), the life of a Latino teen (John Savoca) lies in the balance. The youth has been accused of stabbing his physically abusive father to death with a switchblade knife.

What I initially found fascinating about the film is how most of the details of the murder trial aren't disclosed right away. Instead, they are gradually unveiled as the 12 male jurors discuss and argue the fine points of the case—many of which were glossed over during the actual trial where it seems that expediency took precedence over actual facts. In other words, it seems like a rushed job.

Most of the jurors simply assume that everyone will agree that the boy is guilty, since there's a murder weapon (the knife) and an eyewitness's supposed account of the murder. But one man isn't so sure.

As most of the men mull about in the hot and stultifying jury chamber—anxious to arrive at a quick conclusion so that they can get on with their lives—Juror No. 8 (Henry Fonda) has some reservations about the case. He broods while gazing out of the room's windows. His calm and quiet demeanor belie a steel-trap mind bolstered by many years as an architect.

Juror 8 begins to poke holes in the prosecution's case.

On the opposite side of the spectrum are men like Juror 3 (Lee J. Cobb), a blustery hothead who likes to throw his weight around to intimidate those who don't agree with him. There's also Juror 7 (Jack Warden), a sports junkie who's upset that Juror 8 is hesitant to arrive at a guilty verdict since drawing things out might make him late to a baseball game. To him, deliberating the fate of the young man's life is little more than an inconvenience.

Through the dialogue between the men, bits of their personalities are revealed by degrees—similar to peeling back the layers of an onion. For instance, while Juror 4 (E.G. Marshall), a stockbroker, seems to be similar to Juror 8 when it comes to reasoning and deduction skills, it becomes apparent that he is frigid and detached. Like Juror 7, he regards the initial 11 to 1 jury vote as little more than a disruption of his workday.

One by one, the jurors are swayed by Juror 8 as he begins to poke holes in the prosecution's case. Things that may have initially seemed trivial or swept under the rug are brought up by the doubting architect for deliberation—much to the ire of the men who would like to get on with their lives.

Convincing Performances

Most impressive about this movie is the lifelike and natural exchanges between the men. As the discussions heat up, one character might talk over another—so convinced he is of his point of view. I wouldn't doubt that at least some of the exchanges were deftly improvised. With this ensemble cast of magnificent actors, what could have come off as disjointed instead seems hyperrealistic.

Another thing I appreciate is how the actors controlled their bodies. While I've read that this film is bereft of action, characters don't have to be swinging at each other with wild haymakers for there to be action.

For example, the way that Lee J. Cobb's character maneuvers his barrel-chested body around within the cramped jury room crackles with menace. Anyone who disagrees with him is met with sudden shouting combined with intimidating walk-ups and aggressive body posturing—action enough to convey barely contained threats of violence.

Under the direction of Sidney Lumet and starring some of the finest character actors of the day (or any other day for that matter), the confined space of the jury chamber serves as a pressure cooker of sorts—squeezing the most out its ubertalented cast.

This film is not only a gripping exposé of the inner workings of the legal process but also a realistic depiction of how ordinary people from different backgrounds relate to one another. "12 Angry Men" is a masterpiece of filmmaking in every conceivable way.

Ian Kane is an U.S. Army veteran, author, filmmaker, and actor. He is dedicated to the development and production of innovative, thought-provoking, character-driven films and books of the highest quality. To see more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com

'12 Angry Men'

Director
Sidney Lumet

Starring
Henry Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, Martin Balsam

Not Rated

Running Time
1 hour, 36 minutes

Release Date
April 10, 1957

★★★★★

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