THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

ALL PHOTOS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

FINE ARTS

Caravaggio *and the* Conversion of Saul

A painter's success at depicting a soul's redemption

ELIZABETH LEV

Every civilization loves the new year, a celebration of renewal. In February, we assess our resolutions for self-improvement, our "dry Januarys," or the new diets and exercise programs we've tried to reinvent ourselves with. Many will continue, as these are signs of hope, and a belief that the year may be even better or, more importantly, that despite the omnipresent discouragement and despair, human beings can improve.

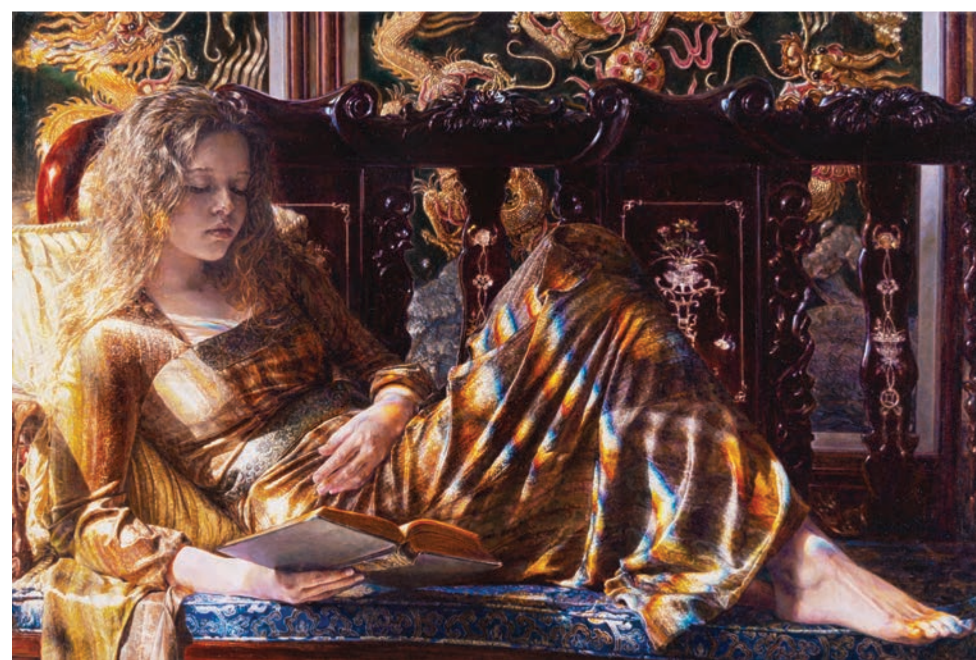
Interestingly, the Catholic Church closes the month of January with a commemoration of the greatest self-improvement story of Scripture, the conversion of Saul. Thus, February is a good time to review it.

A Painting for the Jubilee

The conversion of Saul is a perennial favorite in the history of art: painted, sculpted, and reenacted in every medium.

*Continued on **Page 4***

(Top) "Conversion on the Way to Damascus," circa 1600–1601, by Caravaggio. Oil on canvas. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.
(Above) A portrait of the Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, circa 1621, by Ottavio Leoni.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THE EPOCH TIMES

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Historian Paul Johnson's career has been against the political tide since the 1970s. Former title: "Tilbury Fort–Wind Against the Tide," 1853, by Clarkson Frederick Stanfield. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn.

HISTORY

Against the Tide: Historian Paul Johnson

JEFF MINICK

IAN GAVAN/GETTY IMAGES

Paul Johnson in 2010.

"Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Mr. Gibbon?" These words, attributed to both King George III and the Duke of Cumberland, make mocking reference to Edward Gibbon and his massive work, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."

One wonders what these gentlemen might have thought of some historians of the 20th century. Along with his political involvements and defeating Nazism, Winston Churchill wrote a shelf full of books, most of them histories, and for a time earned a living as a journalist as well. Will and Ariel Durant gave readers the 11-volume set of "The Story of Civilization," which weighs in at 36.6 pounds. More recent disciples of the muse Clio, like Stephen Ambrose and David McCullough, composed numerous histories and brought the past to life for the rest of us.

Standing in this company of prolific authors is historian Paul Johnson (1928–2023).

Following his death on Jan. 12 of this year, many newspapers, magazines, and online commentators marked his passing, with some of the tributes containing rebukes of his conservatism.

During his long life, and in addition to his journalism and commentary, Johnson wrote over 50 books, most of them histories or biographies. Some of these were relatively slim, like his studies of Socrates and Isaac Newton, while others, such as "A History of the American People" or "A History of the Jews," were tomes with a girth that matched their subject matter.

And while some of these works already sit untouched in our libraries, others will be read by students of history for years to come.

A Life in Brief

Paul Johnson received his pre-university education at a Jesuit school, Stonyhurst College, and a degree from Magdalen College at Oxford. After serving out his national service in the army, he then found his way into journalism.

For over 20 years, Johnson was a man of the Left, serving, for example, as the Paris correspondent for the New Statesman magazine and eventually becoming one of its editors. Beginning in the 1970s, however, he became increasingly conservative, opposing in particular the radical policies of Britain's trade unions.

After Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, Johnson, who'd known her at Oxford—"She was not a party person"—became one of her close advisers. He continued as well to play the man of letters, placing reviews and columns in a variety of outlets, including Britain's conservative weekly, The Spectator, and The New York Times.

Meanwhile, he was also writing his books. One of these, his 1983 "Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties," later updated to include the events of the 1990s, proved enormously popular among American conservatives, so much so that it inspired a 1994 collection titled "The Quotable Paul Johnson." A fast writer, capable of producing several thousand words a day, Johnson put out book after book into the first decade of the 21st century, winning applause from some quarters and fury at his opinions from others.

Regarding his personal life, in 1958 Johnson married psychotherapist Marigold Hunt, with whom he had four children: a daughter and three sons. Following in the footsteps of his artistic father, he was also an avid watercolorist who exhibited his work on a regular basis.

Top of the List

Of this profusion of books, perhaps the best known and most popular are "Modern Times" and "A History of the American People."

Johnson begins "Modern Times" by examining the cultural earthquake caused by Einstein's theory of relativity. The relativity associated with physics quickly became confused with relativism so that, as Johnson writes, by the 1920s more and more people had come to believe "there were no longer any absolutes: of time and space, of good and evil, of knowledge, above all of value." A passionate believer in truth and in strict standards of right and wrong, Einstein "lived to see moral relativism, to him a disease, become a social pandemic."

This misapplication of a scientific theory to society and culture can wreak havoc and destruction on societies. Johnson points out several examples of this phenomenon, like this one: "Darwin's notion of the survival of the fittest was a key element both in the Marxist concept of class warfare and of the radical philosophies which shaped Hitlerism."

The horrendous damage done by our modern belief in relativism is the main theme of "Modern Times."

By the time he wrote "Modern Times," Johnson was a staunch anticommunist. And in this compendium of Marxist evils, many readers, including myself, first found a comprehensive history of those crimes against humanity. In addition, Johnson is a historian who knows the value of entertaining and captivating an audience, which he does through the mass of details and stories he offers throughout the book.

In his 1999 revised version of "Modern Times," Johnson concludes his masterpiece with some thoughts about the 20th century that deserve to be cited here in full:

Historian Paul Johnson put out book after book into the first decade of the 21st century.

One of Paul Johnson's most important works: "Modern Times."

The horrendous damage done by our modern belief in relativism is the main theme of 'Modern Times.'

"It was not yet clear whether the underlying evil which had made possible its catastrophic failures and tragedies—the rise of moral relativism, the decline of personal responsibility, the repudiation of Judeo-Christian values, not least the arrogant belief that men and women could solve all the mysteries of the universe by their own unaided instincts—were in the process of being eradicated. On that would depend the chances of the twenty-first century becoming, by contrast, an age of hope for mankind."

I leave it to readers to decide whether we live in an age of hope for mankind.

The Last Best Hope?

Johnson begins his 1997 work "A History of the American People" with this assertion: "The creation of the United States of America is the greatest of all human adventures."

That declaration is especially stunning today, when recent polls indicate a steep decline in the pride that Americans feel about their country.

Johnson then raises three questions: Can a people "rise above the injustices of its origins" and atone for them? He then asks whether the United States has expiated these organic sins. Finally, he asks whether Americans, who "aimed to build an other-worldly 'City on a Hill'" and later devised a republic "to be a model for the entire planet," have made good on these "audacious claims." He then spends over 900 pages narrating American history and searching for answers to those questions.

Though some for political reasons attacked the book and Johnson's affections for the country across the pond, he remained a friend of America. When asked during a Dennis Prager interview how he reacts when an American says, as did Lincoln, that America is the last, best hope of humanity, Johnson responded, "I often say it myself, and I think it's true."

And in this narrative history, as in "Modern Times," Johnson displays that same ability to consider big-picture topics without sacrificing details, stories, and anecdotes. Though I've read this book twice and taught it once, Johnson engages and educates me every time I revisit it. In the chapter "The Korean War and the Fall of MacArthur," for instance, his descriptions of the feisty Harry Truman—his daily routine, his threats of violence in defense of his daughter Margaret when she received a critical review of her concert singing—give us in two pages the essence of that president.

History as an Antitoxin

Like Truman, Paul Johnson could be combative. He told one reporter: "Marigold's often saying to me: 'Please, Paul, have you not got enough enemies already? Will you take a vow not to get into any more rows?'" His opinions in his histories raised hackles among some critics and readers, especially those opposed to his politics and his misgivings about modern culture, and he often returned their fire with fire.

Sometimes, too, he was off-base in his predictions about the future. In discussing a short biography of Winston Churchill that he'd written, Johnson stated: "He made occasional errors of judgment because he made so many judgments—some of them were bound to be wrong!" Those same words apply to Johnson himself, who offered so many opinions and judgments regarding past or present events.

But these criticisms are quibbles when compared to the good we gain from these histories. Like the best of teachers, they entertain, instruct, and make us think. In an address delivered before he wrote any of the books mentioned here, Johnson gave his listeners, and us, one additional important reason for studying the past:

"History is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us so novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises, and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false."

Jeff Minick lives and writes in Front Royal, Virginia. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust on Their Wings," and two works of nonfiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man."

TRUTH *and* TRADITION
In Our Own Words

A New Epoch

"I believe that we need both the light of truth and the guidance of tradition now more than ever.

John Tang
CEO

As a young doctoral candidate who had arrived from China in 1993 with little more than the clothes on my back, I was looking to make a life for myself in America.

The promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was new and exciting to me, a far cry from the totalitarian regime I had been living under.

Living in America is a life-changing experience. For the first time, I could speak without fearing repercussions from the state. I could take every breath knowing that the next one was a protected, inalienable right.

But though I now lived in a free nation, I was keenly aware that the communist regime still ruled my home country with an iron fist. This was illustrated for me in striking detail when, in 1999, Chinese communist leader Jiang Zemin began a crackdown of the spiritual practice Falun Gong.

As a Falun Gong practitioner myself, my life had been enhanced by its principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.

And while I was free to practice my faith in America under the First Amendment, I watched as my friends and family in China lost their homes, their jobs, their freedom, and even their lives, simply for refusing to renounce their faith.

What's more, I watched as the media overseas began to parrot the Chinese Communist Party's disinformation about how we were dangerous, how we were insane, how we were a nuisance to society, and how we deserved to be eliminated.

I watched until I couldn't bear to just watch anymore.

I knew that one of the main reasons this persecution was allowed to go on was because people didn't have access to the truth. Though I could try to convince people one by one, it would be much faster if I could reach the masses.

And with that, in 2000, The Epoch Times was born.

From the start, our founding principles have been truth and tradition—truth, so that injustice around the world can be exposed, and tradition, so that we can uphold the best of what makes us human.

Two decades later, I believe that we need both the light of truth and the guidance of tradition now more than ever.

Around the world, disinformation has only become more prevalent, guided by powerful forces like legacy media, big tech, and various governments. And this disinformation directly impacts the livelihoods of many, while influencing the opinions of many more. But this time, I'm incredibly thankful that I can do more than just watch.

Today, we are a multinational media that spans 35 countries and 21 languages. We are prepared to debunk every lie with evidence and uncover those who pose a threat to the international community, wherever they may be. We strive to dig deep for the facts of the situation while leaving the opinions up to you.

We hope that our efforts can keep you and your loved ones safe in this crisis and beyond; we hope that you'll find our reporting honest, factual, and timely.

Because telling the truth was the entire reason we were founded, it's the one thing we will always dedicate ourselves to before anything else.

Thank you for giving us a read–I hope your experience with us, no matter how long or short, is a pleasant one.

In truth and tradition,

John Tang,
The Epoch Times

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FINE ARTS

Caravaggio *and the* Conversion of Saul

One of the most powerful renditions of the subject was painted by Caravaggio in 1600.

Continued from ***Page 1***

One of the most powerful renditions of the subject was painted by Caravaggio in 1600 for the Roman church of Santa Maria del Popolo.

Commissioned by Tiberio Cerasi, the powerful treasurer-general for Pope Clement VIII, the canvas was placed in the first church that religious pilgrims would see when entering through the northern gate of Rome. The year 1600 was a Jubilee year in Rome, and those who visited the Eternal City would receive special graces. Over a million people made the journey, often on foot, looking for redemption and renewal, and they were greeted with Caravaggio's vision of the most exciting existential reboot in history.

From Saul to Paul

According to the Acts of the Apostles (and St. Paul himself), things did not begin well. Saul was a Jewish man from Tarsus (in today's Turkey) whose first appearance in the Bible comes as he stands by while the Sanhedrin stone St. Stephen to death. As both a Roman citizen and an educated Pharisee, Saul was given permission by the temple elders to imprison both men and women to destroy the fledgling Christian religion.

Heading to Damascus in pursuit of more Christians whom he deemed criminals, he encountered Christ, who called out to him asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The shock of the encounter was so great that he was blinded and could neither eat nor drink, but he arose a new man: Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. His letters would ultimately constitute almost a third of the New Testament. He would traverse over 10,000 miles bringing a message of hope and salvation to a cynical empire before meeting his martyrdom in Rome by beheading.

FREDERICK FENYVESSY/CC BY 2.0

Caravaggio painted "Crucifixion of Saint Peter" (L) and "Conversion on the Way to Damascus," along the side walls of the chapel, but the altarpiece (C) "Assumption of the Virgin" was painted by Rome's most established artist, Annibale Carracci. Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

Caravaggio's Success

For Caravaggio, this commission was a chance to reinvent himself artistically. He had come to Rome from Milan 10 years earlier, but since he had never learned the fresco technique made famous by Michelangelo and Raphael and had never mastered drawing as had these two giants, he seemed destined to a career as a studio hand to produce paintings of fruit, flowers, and domestic canvases that would never propel him to glory. Cerasi contacted the Milanese painter while he was still working on his first public commission for the Church of St. Louis of the French. With the additional commissioned project that was poised to debut in the same year, Caravaggio's big break had finally come.

It was a high-pressure commission. Caravaggio was to paint the "Conversion on the Way to Damascus," and the "Crucifixion of Saint Peter" along the side walls of the chapel, but the altarpiece would be painted by Rome's most established artist, Annibale Carracci. The expert draftsmanship and the striking colors of Carracci's "Assumption of the Virgin" were bound to excite the discerning Roman audiences and delight the pilgrims pouring into the Eternal City.

Furthermore, the only other pairing of the subjects of Saul's conversion and Peter's death had been executed by Michelangelo Buonarroti 50 years earlier in the Vatican. Caravaggio's given name was Michelangelo, so the looming comparison to his awesome homonymous predecessor must have been daunting.

The Florentine Michelangelo had packed his fresco with dozens of gyrating figures resembling shrapnel spraying from Saul's explosive encounter with Jesus. Caravaggio chose not to emulate the older master and instead forged his own style, paring the scene down to three figures: Saul, his horse, and the animal's minder. Saul wears a soldier's cuirass, an old visual trope alluding to his militant intention to arrest Christians, but his horse is a staid work animal, a far cry from the sleek thoroughbreds featured in other versions.

For his part, the shabby groom looks plucked from one of Rome's more disreputable pubs. The three figures occupy all the space in the canvas, the horse receiving the lion's share. With no brilliant sun or cerulean sky to illuminate the event, Caravaggio uses a dramatic tenebrism that he had recently revealed in his canvases at the Church of St. Louis of the French. The drama unfolds against this stark setting with one remarkable absentee: Christ.

SAILKO/CC-BY-3.0

(Center panel) "The Conversion of Saul," circa 1542–1545, by Michelangelo. Pauline Chapel, Vatican Palace, in Vatican City.

Caravaggio visualizes a man 'on fire' with hope, love, and purpose.

This was unheard of. The personal call from Jesus to Saul is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, yet Caravaggio chose to omit the most important character of the story. Looking back at Michelangelo's version, however, one can see an evolutionary thread through the two works. Michelangelo's Christ appears in the upper part of the fresco, soaring above the recumbent Saul while casting down a ray of light like a bolt of lightning. The steed bolts, soldiers retreat in alarm, and one tries to fend off the divine onslaught with his shield.

Caravaggio kept the powerful beam of light but omitted the figure of Christ, implying the divine presence through the radiance that bathes the face of prostrate Saul. It's not a natural light, like the sun or moon or torch, but a supernatural light that finds its mark on Saul alone. The horse notices nothing, and neither does his minder as they both wait patiently for Saul to rise. Caravaggio offered a multifaceted meaning. The apparition of Christ is described as "the Light" to "enlightenment" or the sense of passing to a higher plane of understanding. Even "seeing the light" can be interpreted as the realization of one's errors and the discovery of a new path forward.

Caravaggio depicted Saul as a young man with many serious mistakes behind him but with years of evangelizing ahead of him, as he is shown with his arms outstretched to embrace his new mission. Caravaggio chose not to have Saul hide his face as other artists had done. Instead, Saul transforms into Paul before the beholder's eyes. Even Caravaggio's use of color was unique.

At first glance, the canvas looks like a symphony of browns: the background, the horse's dappled coat, the servant's beige tunic. But when Caravaggio's light strikes Saul, it ignites the scene and turns his cuirass bright orange. Saul lies on the ground against his scarlet mantle, and the color combination evokes the idea of flame. What does it mean to be called, to find meaning? How does it feel to transform into one's best self? Caravaggio visualizes a man "on fire" with hope, love, and purpose.

In choosing to eschew multifigured, sprawling compositions, Caravaggio composed a more accessible vision of change. With no fanfare, no reeling bystanders, Caravaggio portrays the intimate moment, the personal conversion, when one hears the interior voice and embraces a new and higher path.

Elizabeth Lev is an American-born art historian who teaches, lectures, and guides in Rome.

FINE ARTS

'Cowboy Artist' Paints an Epic Event: 'Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flathead Indians at Ross Hole'

YVONNE MARCOTTE

The explorers arrived in the valley on a cold and clear morning in September 1805. With a hint of winter coming, Meriwether Lewis wrote in his weather diary that an inch of ice covered the ground in Ross's Hole, Montana. John Ordway, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, noted that snow now covered the nearby mountains. As the group descended the Bitterroot Mountains, second-in-command William Clark observed several ibex, or bighorn sheep, grazing nearby.

The Flathead peoples had lived in the valley between the Sapphire and Bitterroot mountain ranges of western Montana for many generations before the American explorers arrived. Clark wrote how the explorers met lodge members of the Salish Flathead Indians and that they were received warmly. Artist Charles Marion Russell (1864–1926) memorialized this meeting in his painting "Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flathead Indians at Ross Hole" (1912).

Russell, known as the "Cowboy Artist," made his home in Great Falls, Montana. Government officials commissioned him to do a painting for placement in the state's legislative chamber in the capitol at Helena.

The artist was to paint "early Montana scenes and figures, as are of value from a historical standpoint, and that such decorations be executed by Montana Artists of recognized ability and standing," which was approved by Senate Joint Resolution No. 4 on Feb. 2, 1911. This was the first time that Russell, who was self-taught, had attempted a painting of monumental scale. It was planned for the wall at the head of the chamber.

Go West, Young Man

Russell had honed his art skills and lived the life of a cowboy to prepare. The so-called Wild West, explored by the Lewis and Clark expedition less than 50 years before, obsessed young Charlie Russell growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, in the mid-1800s. He saw explorers and fur trappers come into his hometown and tell tales of their travels, and he watched as settlers left the Gateway City for land and opportunity.

He started drawing images of that fabled region at a young age, inspired by Western pulp novels and the stories he heard.

He wanted to see the West for himself. When he was 16, Russell could no longer resist the call westward and left for Montana. He found work as a sheep herder, making sketches of the landscape as he worked. A rancher later hired him as a cowboy, where Russell documented the harsh winter in a series of watercolors.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"Cowboy Artist" Charles Marion Russell painted scenes of the American West.

This was the first time artist Charles Russell attempted a painting of monumental scale.

He spent time among the Blood Indians, a part of the Blackfeet nation, learning their ways and collecting artifacts. Russell soon moved to Great Falls, Montana, where he began to make his living as an artist. He remained there for the rest of his life and memorialized his deep love for the West in a monumental painting.

Painting the Real West

The state of Montana was born with the yelps and cries of the original inhabitants who welcomed the explorers. Russell wanted to show this in his painting as a tribute to his adopted state's vibrant ancestry.

A critique of the painting by Patricia M. Burnham points to the dramatic story taking place: "The sweep of horses and Indian riders into the center foreground, the tilted lances, the dramatic cloud patterns, create an action scene of stupendous energy and vitality." The significant, but less dramatic, negotiations between Lewis and Clark and the tribal leaders, on the other hand, are almost lost to view in the quiet of the middle ground on the right.

Russell places the Flathead warriors on horseback front and center, and now the painting comes alive. The graceful contortions of the young warriors immediately pull the viewer into the action. The composition stirs the imagination as the Indians are shown running forward at full speed, only to pull back at the last moment. The composition of this historic event shows the power and magnificence of the Salish lodge as their leader greets the expedition.

Burnham's description of the main figure notes: "Russell made numerous pencil sketches of the central figure in the painting until he arrived at the pose, the physical features, and above all, the telling gesture that would heighten the drama of this encounter. The expression on the [central Flathead Indian] face is severe, even fierce; the action is quick, vigorous, commanding." The figure points to Lewis and Clark.

The far right of the composition shows the Salish lodge leader meeting with the explorers. The figures of Lewis and Clark, in contrast to the fierce stance of the Flathead warriors on horseback, are shown as patient and cautious as they await their guide's translations.

According to recorded accounts, their Lemhi Shoshone guide Toby speaks to the Salish Flathead leaders in Plains sign language. Regarding the literal meaning of "Flathead," most likely the name comes from a misinterpreted Indian sign made by patting the head above and back of the ear.

Sacagawea, another Lemhi Shoshone guide, is shown nearby kneeling in the grass. She was married to French Canadian fur trader Toussaint Charbonneau, who was acting as the expedition's guide across the Rocky Mountains.

William Clark's slave York, another member of the expedition, tends the horses. The artist clothed York in more formal apparel consisting of breeches and a tricorn hat instead of buckskins, which he most likely would have worn during the expedition.

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

"Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flathead Indians at Ross Hole," 1912, by Charles M. Russell. Oil on canvas; 11 1/2 feet by 24 1/2 feet.

Although some criticized Russell's inaccurate detail of Flathead dress, he used what was available to him at the time: notably, records in the Great Falls library, journals of the historic expedition, and his own extensive collection of native costume and artifacts.

Prickly Process Ends in Acclaim

Gov. Edwin L. Norris wanted the painting finished for the inauguration of the capitol, only months away. Russell's wife, Nancy, often stepped in to allay the concerns of government officials that the painting would be finished in time, for she knew her husband; Russell worked with astonishing speed.

Russell's painting was installed in the House of Representatives chambers ahead of schedule on July 11, 1912.

Although the interactions between the artist and state officials may have been bumpy at times, the end result satisfied all concerned. When the painting was unveiled, it was met by resounding praise.

Russell painted a grand scene, just as Renaissance artists depicted heavenly realms or historic events. The figures' stance and movements tell the story, as good visual storytelling must do.

One reviewer from the Great Falls Daily Tribune wrote:

"If all the works of Russell, save this, were to perish, this picture would stand alone as a monument to his genius which would give him a leading place among America's great artists."

These western lands, newly mapped and recorded by Lewis and Clark, attracted artists wanting to live, admire, and paint its wild lands and peoples. Russell was one. He painted the scenes of this time and used his artistic skills and imagination to bring the West alive for future generations.

HARVEST

A sampling of paintings by Jacques Pépin in his book "Art of the Chicken."

BOOK REVIEW

The Glorious Chicken

Master chef Jacques Pépin celebrates the bird in art and recipes

ANITA L. SHERMAN

A fair portion of my pantry shelves are devoted to cookbooks. One of my favorite French chefs is Jacques Pépin, and I have several of his. He has authored more than 30.

Over the holidays, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that not only is he a master in the kitchen, but he's equally comfortable holding a paintbrush. These dual passions complement each other in a beautifully crafted partnership.

For the first time, in "Art of the Chicken: A Master Chef's Paintings, Stories, and Recipes of the Humble Bird," readers will get a glimpse into his expertise with acrylics as dozens of his paintings are included in this enchanting volume.

Reinvention: The Recipe of Life

At 87, Pépin is ever opening new doors.

This gem is not a cookbook, although there are recipes included. It's also not a commentary on his artwork, though no doubt readers will enjoy the collection of colorful, often whimsical paintings of what he refers to as "the humble bird"—in other words, the chicken. For those of you familiar with the myriad breeds, you'll know how dazzling the plumage can be.

This book, told in Pépin's own words, shares the story of that life from his rural roots growing up in Bourg-en-Bresse, France, to his eventual move to the United States, where he now calls Connecticut his home.

He has had an illustrious culinary career not only in the kitchen but also as an author and culinary educator. Pépin taught in the Culinary Arts Program at Boston University and served as dean of special programs at the International Culinary Center in New York City. An educated man, he holds a bachelor's of arts and a master's degree from Columbia University in French literature.

He was the personal chef of French President Charles de Gaulle and refused the same job with President John F. Kennedy in the White House. His decision at that time was to instead accept a position with the Howard Johnson restaurant franchise. Pépin knew what ingredients it took to cook for intimate gatherings and wanted to further his knowledge about preparing food on a much larger scale.

Professional accolades aside, what is most inspiring and intriguing about this collection of prose and paintings is learning about this man's lifelong relationship to food, family, and friends. He is devoted to all. His generosity of spirit, zest for living, and creative approach to his cooking and his artwork is a satisfying read and a story worth sharing.

As a boy, Pépin spent many hours roaming the rural French countryside, often tracking down rogue chickens that had found their way out of barnyards. He learned much about cooking from his mother, who prepared meals simply, with the finest ingredients on hand, wasting little and always bringing a smile to those who sat at her table.

From working in high-end Parisian restaurants and hotels to entertaining neighbors at his home, Pépin savored all his experiences and poured his energies into each new position, bringing his talents as well as his jovial and charming disposition. He relished a good prank.

Partnering with American Chef Julia Child, Pépin made a lasting friendship. Their 1999 PBS series "Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home" won a Daytime Emmy Award.

Their culinary chemistry was magical. Together, they invited viewers to share their recipes and cooking methods. But for many, the best part was the end, when the feast was shared and the delights of connecting over fine fare was spirit-lifting.

Pépin's fascination with chickens is at the core of this book.

Dedicated to culinary education, Pépin also created the Jacques Pépin Foundation in 2016.

Pépin's 'Humble Bird'

Clucking, scratching, and eventually cooked, the humble chicken is at the core of this book, whether Pepin is trussing them or capturing their essence on canvas. Long before modern kitchen gadgets, Pépin was mashing poached chicken breasts through a sieve to create a sublime chicken mousse or perhaps a quenelle. At a young age, he mastered the art of deboning a chicken in a matter of minutes with a few quick and precise cuts.

He spent hours observing their often-humorous antics, and he gloried in the wealth of dishes that can be created from all their parts—from livers, hearts, and gizzards to the succulent breasts. And then there are the eggs: so many ways to cook these golden orbs.

This isn't a heavy read for the new year. It won't tax a reader's sensibilities or cause internal conflict. What it will do, however, is bring a smile to your face as you chuckle over some of his more comical chicken renderings. I suspect some readers will jot down some of his recipes.

But the takeaway, beneath the paintings and the gastronomical delights, is that there are no ends—only a series of new beginnings in our endeavors, whatever they might be. This charming book will take readers into Pépin's private realm. Written in such a personal and inviting style, it's like a visit to his home or art studio to share a glass of wine, sparkling conversation, and a simple meal with chicken as its star.

Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist who has more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for local papers and regional publications in Virginia. She now works as a freelance writer and is working on her first novel. She is the mother of three grown children and grandmother to four, and she resides in Warrenton, Va. She can be reached at anitajustwrite@gmail.com

'ART OF THE CHICKEN: A MASTER CHEF'S PAINTINGS, STORIES, AND RECIPES OF THE HUMBLE BIRD'
By Jacques Pépin
Harvest
Sept. 27, 2022
Hardcover
256 pages

BOOK REVIEW

A Thorough Breakdown of World War II Events in Stalingrad

DUSTIN BASS

Operation Barbarossa, which launched the German invasion into the Soviet Union during World War II, proved to be one of the pivotal mistakes that led to Nazi Germany's ultimate defeat.

The Germans had launched their invasion in the summer of 1941, and by the winter of that year it had become clear how colossal of a mistake the invasion had been. William E. Hiestand takes the reader on an in-depth journey, not into the invasion but into what happened once the German Sixth Army found themselves deep in Soviet territory, specifically Stalingrad.

"Stalingrad Airlift 1942–43: The Luftwaffe's Broken Promise to Sixth Army" is an insightful breakdown of what went wrong with the promises made by the German High Command to the Sixth Army. After Adolf Hitler's command to the army to "stand fast" in Stalingrad, Hiestand explains what the Germans planned to do in order to make the stand last. He also explains with precise and necessary details how those plans unraveled and resulted in a disaster for the Sixth Army, the Luftwaffe, the war in the east, and the Nazi war machine as a whole.

Describing Events on Both Sides

Hiestand has assembled an easy-to-follow yet thorough explanation of how the promised airlift into Stalingrad collapsed. As he explains, the airlift plan was rather haphazardly coordinated. Commanders placed in control of the airlift plan proved unfit to lead the massive undertaking and were replaced by others who also proved incapable. By the time the German High Command found the proper fit, it was too late.

Along with having to operate under ill-prepared leaders, the Sixth Army and the Luftwaffe had to combat the Soviet Army, Air Force (VVS), and weather. All three kept the Germans from being able to provide the necessary tonnage of fuel, ammunition, and rations for the 250,000 soldiers in Stalingrad.

Hiestand describes how the early months of the Stalingrad stand favored the Germans, as they controlled several airfields west of Stalingrad and the Luftwaffe displayed superiority over the VVS. Over time, however, the Soviet army surrounded the Sixth Army, destroyed the runways at the airfields and eventually retook them, and also achieved a more comparable level of aerial combat, which made German aerial transports of supplies far more risky and far less successful.

The Germans' initial push into the Soviet Union to Stalingrad was unintentionally assisted by the Soviets. Hiestand explains how Joseph Stalin's military purges had eliminated many experienced officers from the ranks. The pilots of the VVS were few and unprepared.

As Hiestand points out in the book, VVS pilots at times had as few as eight hours of flying experience (pilots with little experience were dubbed "take off and landing" because that was the sum of their aerial combat skills), while pilots of the Luftwaffe averaged approximately 300 hours. Soviet planes also had to rely on wing or hand signals from their flight leaders for communication. In many cases, pilots were paying more attention to their flight leaders than to the enemy. Hiestand points out that the VVS command adopted many of the German methods, including flight formation and installing radios in the planes.

In the winter of 1942, the weather in Stalingrad proved just as deadly and destructive, if not more so, as the Soviet military. Hiestand details how, in conjunction with the weather, the VVS created an air blockade over Stalingrad with an "ace regiment" from the 9th Guard's best pilots.

The book provides visual maps with legends concerning the airlift and the air blockade.

With a technologically advancing Soviet army and air force, worsening weather, and a more competent and confident Soviet command, the Germans also faced another problem: Hitler. The Fuhrer's orders to remain in Stalingrad, even if encircled, and the lack of pushback from generals, whom Hiestand refers to as "sycophants," kept the German Sixth Army in a rapidly eroding position.

The stubbornness and hubris of the German High Command would ultimately result in the loss of over 500,000 Axis troops, including most of the Sixth Army, along with massive losses in German aircraft. By the end of 1950, when German troops of the Sixth Army were allowed to return home, only 6,000 remained.

An Insightful Study of the Stalingrad Airlift

"Stalingrad Airlift 1942–43" is a great addition to the study of World War II, especially the eastern front. Hiestand's book is full of graphics that visually break down German aircraft capabilities, timelines of gains and losses throughout the Battle of Stalingrad, and the expectations and fulfillments of the airlift.

The book provides visual maps with legends concerning the airlift and the air blockade. There are also plenty of photographs of German and Soviet aircraft, soldiers and officers, and moments from the battles.

Hiestand's work is a highly recommended read for World War II enthusiasts and for those who would like a quick yet thorough look at what happened in Stalingrad during the war. A very enjoyable read.

Dustin Bass is the host of EpochTV's "About the Book," a show about new books with the authors who wrote them. He is an author and co-host of The Sons of History podcast.

'STALINGRAD AIRLIFT 1942–43: THE LUFTWAFFE'S BROKEN PROMISE TO SIXTH ARMY'
By William E. Hiestand
Osprey Publishing
Jan. 17, 2023
Paperback
96 pages

FILM REVIEW

Director Kolirin's Subtle Commentary on Middle Eastern Borders

MICHAEL CLARK

Not quite as good as his similarly themed "The Band's Visit" from 2007, director Eran Kolirin's "Let It Be Morning" ("LIBM") offers a subtler take on the multimillennia-old Arab-Israeli conflict.

Set in a remote, unspecified West Bank Israeli town that has seen better days, "LIBM" is presented from the perspective of Sami (Alex Bakri, a taller, Mediterranean version of Ryan Gosling), a favorite son who left years ago and found success as a technologies executive in Jerusalem. Everyone in the village loves Sami or, at least, what they believe he's achieved.

When Doves Don't Fly

Sami has returned home with his wife, Mira (a spectacular Juna Suleiman), and child in tow to attend the wedding of his younger brother Aziz.

In the film's first passage of bone-dry humor, a box of doves is released with everyone (especially the bride and groom) expecting them to fly away during a fireworks display. The birds instead meander out of the cage and begin mingling with the guests, with no intention of taking flight.

This is the exact opposite mindset of Sami, who can't wait to leave. He barely interacts with his family and old friends, instead spending the bulk of the time texting to whom we later find out is his mistress back in Jerusalem.

After some quickie goodbyes, Sami and Mira hit the road and quickly reach a blockade set up by heavily armed Israeli soldiers. No one can leave, no one can enter, no reasons are offered as to why and, in short order, there will be no phone reception.

Up Goes the Wall

Upon returning the next day, Sami and some others visit the blockade and notice giant, stories-high cement pillars being erected to form a wall. They are told that there are "daffawis" living and working in the village and that they must be turned over to the authorities.

Although "daffawis" is never clearly defined, Mira informs her son that it is a derogatory slur targeted toward Palestinians and to not use it. The big surprise: Sami, Mira, and everyone they know are also Palestinians living legally in Israel. The "daffawis" are there illegally. And there's the rub.

Nobody wants to rat the "daffawis" out, but after the army cuts off electricity the following day, tensions rise, patience begins to thin, and panic buying leaves grocery store shelves empty.

Old Friends Reconnect

With not much to do, Sami starts hanging out with his childhood friend Abed (Ehab Salami), a nebbish sort whose wife has left him for reasons better left unrevealed here. Abed is under the impression that buying and operating a taxi will win her back, but the only thing it accomplishes is that he gets leaned on heavily by Ashraf (Nadib Spadi), the local loan shark and town bully. The only reason Abed isn't dead already is his close proximity to Sami.

As the narrative inches toward its somewhat surprising conclusion, we notice that Sami's impenetrable veneer starts to strip away. He (separately) engages his mom and dad in the type of conversations that most parents never have with their adult children. He explains things to Mira, things she already knew, and all but orders Abed to stop worshiping him because he's not worthy of the praise.

Kolirin's screenplay, adapted from the novel of the same name by Sayed Kashua (himself an Israeli-born Palestinian), neither spells everything out nor brings politics and religion into the mix, which in itself is a major accomplishment, considering the potential powder keg scenario put forth.

Kolirin's choice to end the narrative abruptly and without a clear resolution was smart, as these conflicts have no easy answers.

It's What You Value

It's a safe bet that viewers will take their own politics and morality into consideration when determining whether they "like" the movie or not, as the parallels to what is depicted here isn't all that far removed from what's been going on at the U.S. southern border for decades.

There are many gray areas going into "LIBM" and even more on the way out, which will be good for some, but certainly not for all audiences. Telling people what to think, how to think, or worse, telling them what they think is wrong is not the job of responsible filmmakers.

One fact that few rational people will argue with: No country is secure without borders and restrictions; legal immigration rules almost every country on the planet, except the United States, whose own rules it does not seem to understand, embrace, or enforce.

Presented in subtitled Arabic and Hebrew.

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has provided film content to over 30 print and online media outlets. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a weekly contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles. He favors dark comedy, thrillers, and documentaries.

COHEN MEDIA GROUP

Sami (Alex Bakri) and his wife, Mira (Juna Suleiman), in "Let It Be Morning."

Director Kolirin's screenplay avoids politics and religion.

'Let It Be Morning'

Director: Eran Kolirin
Starring: Alex Bakri, Juna Suleiman, Ehab Salami, Khalifa Natour
Running Time: 1 hour, 41 minutes
MPAA Rating: NR
Release Date: Feb. 3, 2023
★★★½

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

A Pig's Parable About Prejudice

RUDOLPH LAMBERT FERNANDEZ

Dick King-Smith's children's novel "The Sheep-Pig" inspired director Chris Noonan's film "Babe." It's a tale about prejudice, but told so entertainingly that you might miss its more sober messages.

A kind piglet, Babe (voiced by Christine Cavanaugh) grows up on a farm run by Arthur Hoggett (James Cromwell) and wife Esme (Magda Szubanski), except that neither Babe nor Hoggett is typical. Babe communicates—effectively—with the other farm animals. Hoggett trusts his gut instinct, whereas other farmers rely on convention.

Frankly, little about Noonan's film is typical.

Babe herds chickens and sheep more easily than Hoggett's weathered sheepdogs, Fly (voiced by Miriam Margolyes) and Rex (voiced by Hugo Weaving). Then he heals and unites the troubled animal farm.

The brooding, 6-foot-7-inch-tall Cromwell presents a towering and comical contrast to haughtier busybodies, whether they're officials at the local sheepherding competition or fellow farmers.

He's nearly two feet taller than Szubanski, and canny makeup helps sufficiently age the then 34-year-old to convincingly play wife to the then 55-year-old. Cavanaugh, whose baby voice breathes life into Babe, was 32 at the time of filming.

If Nigel Westlake's music is the skeleton holding up the flesh and bones of this film, the theme song "If I Had Words" is its spine, derived from the original 1977 song. That charming tune, armed with a reggae beat in the film, is in turn derived from a melody in Saint-Saëns's Symphony No. 3 in C minor.

Animal trainer Karl Lewis Miller and team expertly trained some 1,000 animals, including dogs, cats, sheep, horses, cows, and ducks, of which only half ended up on screen. Since pigs grow too fast, he used nearly 50 piglets, in turn, to play Babe. Although Babe is male, most pigs filmed were female.

Trainers had to be next to real animals and not off-camera, which close shots afforded. So, wide and long shots used animatronic pigs. Unsurprisingly, out of seven Oscar nominations, the lone Oscar that "Babe" won was for Visual Effects.

Feelingly, narrator Roscoe Lee Browne fills in gaps in the narrative because the animal characters can't possibly explain everything, and Hoggett himself hardly talks.

Noonan uses a fax machine (new in the Hoggett home) as a symbol of pathbreaking communication unraveling on the farm. Inside, Hoggett breaks the time-space barrier, faxing his last-minute entry into the sheepherding competition, instantly. Outside, Babe defies convention by herding chickens and sheep almost as easily.

Some Rules Meant to be Broken

At first, Babe's "unprejudiced heart" recoils at the farm's divisions (and delusions): pigs that are considered no more than pork servings on the dining table, and dogs that are required to corral sheep because sheep can't do it themselves.

Soon enough, Babe rejects injustices sold to him as "the way things are." Instead, he reimagines the way things might be. Hoggett's farm operates as a kind of microcosm of society. Its lessons?

Individuals, not institutions, must tackle prejudice first. At a time when pigs were shunned, except by other pigs, one animal (Fly) embraces Babe. Only then do others follow. Individuals waiting for institutions to lead the way are missing a trick.

Ignorance, rather than inherent enmity, creates and sustains prejudice. Sheep acknowledge the code of dutiful care that sheepdogs exercise over them only when dogs recognize that sheep aren't stupid, to be herded by brute force alone.

All rules have reasons, but not all are automatically reasonable. Prejudice, too, is a rule often handed down unchallenged.

Sheepdog Rex imposes rules about who's allowed to talk to whom, especially when it comes to the outlier, such as the duck who thinks he's a rooster. Babe defies them; no one, even outliers, should be made to feel worthless or inferior.

Babe's first owner sells him for nothing because he's a "worthless little runt," not worth a price tag. As it happens, Babe turns out to be priceless.

When at a fair Hoggett is asked to buy Babe, he reflexively refers to his rule "Don't keep pigs." On Babe's account, he not only breaks that rule but others too: Only cats and dogs are allowed inside the house, and only sheepdogs can herd sheep.

Aging ewe Maa (voiced by Miriam Flynn) tries to impose her stereotypes onto Babe: All "wolves" (actually, sheepdogs) are savages. But Babe makes up his own mind. Some dogs do fit Maa's stereotype, but Fly's compassion proves that not all dogs do.

For all her compassion, Fly also succumbs to stereotypes, urging Babe to dominate sheep so they obey. Babe finds that Fly's bark (and Rex's bite) alienates. So he decides to stay kind regardless and refuses to prejudge any species unless their behavior is demonstrably mala fide.

Of course, Babe knows that not all species are alike. Inclusion or unity does not, and need not, always mean sameness. Each has a distinct role to play and a distinct style. Only roosters can crow. Only sheep can grow wool. Only horses or cattle can draw large carriages.

And even when he, a pig, miraculously herds sheep, he'll herd differently from how sheepdogs do.

Rudolph Lambert Fernandez is an independent writer who writes on pop culture.

UNIVERSAL/GETTY IMAGES

Arthur Hoggett (James Cromwell) with Babe (Christine Cavanaugh), in a scene from the film "Babe."

Babe re-imagines the way things might be.

'Babe'

Director: Chris Noonan
Starring: Christine Cavanaugh, James Cromwell, Magda Szubanski
MPAA Rating: G
Running Time: 1 hour, 32 minutes
Release Date: Aug. 4, 1995
★★★★★

FINE ART

Honoring Realist Art Today

Finalists and winners of the '16th Art Renewal Center Salon Competition'

LORRAINE FERRIER

Art collector Frederick Ross founded U.S.-based nonprofit organization Art Renewal Center (ARC) in 1999 to support traditional realist artists and realist art education around the world, and to acquire notable realist artworks.

In "The Philosophy of ARC," Ross states that the visual language of traditional realism "can be understood by all people everywhere on earth regardless of what language it is they speak or write."

In 2004, the ARC founded its annual "International ARC Salon Competition." Early this year, the ARC announced the winners of the 16th salon competition, from more than 5,400 entries from 75 countries. Here, we feature some of the notable and award-winning artworks.

More than 75 of the works will be on display in the "16th International ARC Salon Exhibition," at Sotheby's New York from July 15 to 24. Some of the works can be purchased at the exhibition and also on the ARC website. To find out more, visit ArtRenewal.org.

Artist Keiichiro Kono makes sure he captures the charm of each model he paints, he said on his online artist statement. First place in the Figurative category: "Nazuna No. 2," 2021, by Keiichiro Kono (Japan). Oil on panel; 20 3/4 inches by 20 3/4 inches.

Artist Randalf Dilla rendered an angel falling through the vaulted ceiling of a Gothic church. Dilla's angel represents a person who has gradually lost their faith in God, he said on his online artist statement. "Humanity is losing its grip on faith, like this angel who has fallen down from heaven, people lose their kindness and morality," he said. Second place in the Imaginative Realism category: "Fallen," 2021, by Randalf Dilla (Philippines). Oil on canvas; 36 inches by 24 inches.

Self-taught oil painter William R. Davis delights in recreating 18th- to early 19th-century maritime views. Currently, he's focusing on painting historic lighthouses around the country, such as this painting of Portland, Maine's Rams Ledge Lighthouse at low tide, which he painted as it appeared shortly after its construction in 1905. Having always had an interest in history, Davis accurately shows the lighthouses as they once were, and sometimes he makes visual records of lighthouses that have long been destroyed. Best Marine Themed Work and honorable mention in the Landscape category: "Passing Showers, Rams Ledge Light, Portland, Maine," 2021, by William R. Davis (United States). Oil on panel; 9 inches by 18 inches.

In his painting "Mujer con Ramo (Woman With a Bouquet)," self-taught artist Marcos Rey depicts a young woman full of poise in the face of adversity. She's lost everything, he said on his online artist statement. Rey rendered all around her dead and in contrast kept her stoic, beautiful, and dignified. "I have used different techniques that have allowed me to provide a great wealth of nuances and textures to the drawing to try to convey a feeling of realism and drama," he said. Third place in the Drawing category: "Mujer con Ramo (Woman With a Bouquet)," 2020, by Marcos Rey (Peru). Charcoal, graphite, ink, and wash on canvas; 39 1/4 inches by 26 1/4 inches.

Every year, artist Joke Frima sketches and photographs the vast lotus pond less than 20 miles from her studio in Vissigny, Burgundy, in France. She loves how the lotus leaf stems form a mighty, mysterious forest. The pandemic gave Frima the chance to create a vast lotus pond composition from the sketches and photos she'd made. She worked on the painting full time from September 2020 to April 2021. "I don't know how I did it," she said in her online artist statement. Second place in the Landscape category: "Eagerly Growing Lotus," 2021, by Joke Frima (France). Oil on linen; 43 1/4 inches by 90 1/2 inches.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ART RENEWAL CENTER

On her online artist statement, artist Alexandra Klimas paints animals destined for our dinner plate, paying homage to what she calls these "forgotten" animals. She wants her paintings to encourage others to reconnect with nature and bring more empathy to their lives. She's painted the vast sky in "Bill the Bull and His Cow" to show the greater world of which these creatures are a part. Third place in the Landscape category: "Bill the Bull and His Cow," 2021, by Alexandra Klimas (Netherlands). Oil on canvas; 35 1/4 inches by 47 inches.

Artist Narelle Zeller creates paintings that explore the human condition and our connection with the natural world, she said on her online artist statement. In "The Weaving," she created a floral centerpiece where orb weaver spiders spin their webs, against a backdrop of crocheted cloth. She made the painting to convey how the "natural and man-made elements are woven together." First place in the Still Life category: "The Weaving," 2022, by Narelle Zeller (Australia). Oil on aluminum composite material panel; 22 1/4 inches by 22 1/4 inches.

Artists Chanel Cha's lonely childhood sparked her vivid imagination. Growing up in the South Korean countryside of Gwangju, she developed her love of nature. Cha became an artist after moving to Canada where, she said, it was the first time she could freely express herself. Cha paints in a traditional style inspired by the Italian masters, using soft colors and gentle brushstrokes to convey subjects of delicacy and beauty. In "Dreaming" she's painted a girl, perhaps from another realm, definitely in the moment where reality and fairytales merge, she said in her online artist statement. First place in the Portraiture category and an honorable mention in the Fully From Life category: "Dreaming," 2022, by Chanel Cha (Canada). Oil on linen; 36 inches by 26 inches.

GOLDEN ERA FILM

The Stars Were Crossed in Real Life as Well

TIFFANY BRANNAN

"Romeo and Juliet" is the quintessential love story. The pair of star-crossed lovers from fair Verona were glorified by William Shakespeare's pen, but the immortal pen didn't invent the story. The tragic love story drew inspiration from an ancient Greek tale. The immortal bard's work has been adapted into countless operas, ballets, and films. Although most people are familiar with the 1968 movie of "Romeo and Juliet" or the modern retelling with Leonardo DiCaprio from 1996, there is an earlier film of the story that deserves to be rediscovered.

In 1936, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. made a lavish film of "Romeo and Juliet." It was the first English-language talkie adaptation of the story, and it starred Hollywood royalty. Romeo was played by distinguished British actor Leslie Howard, who would be immortalized by his role as Ashley in "Gone With the Wind" three years later.

Juliet was played by Norma Shearer, who was called the "Queen of MGM" because of her marriage to the film's producer, boy wonder Irving Thalberg. Mercutio was played by stage and screen star John Barrymore of the famous Barrymore family.

Supporting actors included screen veterans C. Aubrey Smith, Edna May Oliver, Reginald Denny, and Andy Devine. The film was directed by Academy Award winner George Cukor.

The lives of this movie's three central actors were touched with tragedy.

'Romeo and Juliet'

Director:
George Cukor

Starring:
Leslie Howard, Norma Shearer, John Barrymore

MPAA Rating:
Not Rated

Running Time:
2 hours, 5 minutes

Release Date:
Aug. 20, 1936

★★★★★

A Traditional Production

Just about everyone knows the story of the young lovers from feuding families, and the script is largely based on the original text. In fact, much Shakespearean dialogue was included, unabridged and without being watered down. Even many lengthy soliloquies were included for the two leads, offering insight into their thoughts and feelings.

All the actors had the theatrical training and refined accents to deliver the eloquent prose convincingly, even in rhyme at times. When John Barrymore is the most American actor in your principal cast, you know you have an elite group.

Herbert Stothart, MGM's main composer in the 1930s, wrote the score for this film. He based it on the famous themes in Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture," but he didn't just use the overplayed love theme. He also utilized the beautiful leitmotifs that represent the different characters and their interactions.

The biggest complaint about the casting, which was lodged upon the film's original release, was that many of the principal actors were too old for their characters, particularly the titular lovers. At the time of filming, Norma Shearer was 34, playing the nearly 13-year-old Juliet. Leslie Howard was 43, playing the 18-year-old Romeo. John Barrymore was 54, playing Romeo's friend Mercutio.

Despite having long heard about these obvious age disparities, I was surprised by how little it bothered me upon actually watching the film. All the actors embodied their characters so thoroughly that I found myself being totally carried away by the story.

Romeo (Leslie Howard) courts Juliet (Norma Shearer), in "Romeo and Juliet."

MOVIESTILLSDB

Also, makeup, costumes, and hairstyling were used very effectively to make the title couple look youthful and fresh. I was especially impressed by the acting choices that Shearer employed to make herself seem like a young girl, such as her hand positions, tone of voice, and facial expressions.

Barrymore's Mercutio doesn't look like a boy anymore, but his performance is invested enough to make us believe that he is a middle-aged idler who enjoys wine, women, and song with the foolish impetuosity of a young man. Thankfully, the age of these characters is not emphasized too strongly, so it seems less important.

Life Imitates Art

This is the last film that Irving Thalberg completed before his untimely death. For years, he had wanted to make a film of "Romeo and Juliet" as a vehicle for his wife, but Louis B. Mayer thought Shakespeare was too highbrow for movie audiences.

However, the announcement of the Warner Bros. film "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in 1935 made him change his mind. Thalberg was an intellectual who appreciated high forms of culture and art, so he endeavored to elevate the medium of cinema to the Shakespearean level rather than dumb down the source materials. In fact, according to "Shakespeare in the Movies" by Douglas Brode, Thalberg said that his goal was to "make the production what Shakespeare would have wanted had he possessed the facilities of cinema."

Behind and Beyond the Scenes

The lives of this movie's three central actors were touched with tragedy. John Barrymore died in 1942 at age 60 from cirrhosis of the liver, coupled with pneumonia and other ailments likely brought on by decades of alcoholism. He was brought to the hospital after collapsing during a radio program rehearsal, ironically right after reciting the "Romeo and Juliet" line "Soft! What light through yonder window breaks?" According to Michael A. Morrison's "John Barrymore, Shakespearean Actor," that was the last line that "The Great Profile" would speak in his acting career.

In 1943, Leslie Howard died at age 50 when an airplane on which he was flying to promote the British cause during World War II was shot down by German planes over the Atlantic Ocean.

Although Norma Shearer would live to an old age, her life was touched by tragedy. On Sept. 14, 1936, her beloved husband died at 37. Although everyone had long known that he suffered from a heart condition, which would undoubtedly shorten his life, it was still a shock to the mother of two to lose her young husband after only nine years of marriage. It was bitterly ironic that he died on the night of the film's Los Angeles premiere.

Perhaps Norma Shearer drew on her own fears for her husband's health and life as she wept over Romeo's lifeless body in the film, knowing that one day, perhaps very soon, she would weep over her own husband in real life.

A Beautiful Love Story

"Romeo and Juliet" is a beautiful love story that still is very poignant today. Although reading Shakespeare's text is always an educational experience, his poetic words were meant to be spoken and heard so that their unique sounds could be enjoyed aloud. Although no film can compare to the magic of live theater, I highly recommend the Thalberg production as a film version of this story.

Particularly beautiful is the scene of their wedding night. After Romeo climbs a rope ladder to Juliet's balcony, the camera pans across ethereal footage of gentle nature at rest. Tchaikovsky's lovely themes are the perfect accompaniment to the imagery of rippling ponds, rustling leaves, and slumbering flowers.

When we see the young couple again, they are gently reclining in her chamber, talking of their love. It's a beautifully pure interpretation of a sacred relationship, which is so often sullied by indiscreet portrayals.

This movie is very artistic, lavish, and beautiful. In a time when most content we see is so ugly, it's extremely refreshing to enjoy beautiful art for its own resplendent sake. This Valentine's Day, celebrate true love with this story of the doomed young couple from Verona. Just like Romeo and Juliet, Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg were proof that true love is worth overcoming your differences, even if it's short-lived.

Tiffany Brannan is a 21-year-old opera singer, Hollywood historian, interviewer, copywriter, fashion historian, travel writer, and vintage lifestyle enthusiast. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.

For more arts and culture articles, visit TheEpochTimes.com

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Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg on their wedding day at their home in Beverly Hills, Calif.

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

A Masterful, Timely Drama About Corporate Greed

IAN KANE

In many ways, the 1970s uncannily parallel many of the trials and tribulations of our troubled modern times: An out-of-control globalist military-industrial complex leading the United States into unnecessary warfare, an energy crisis and soaring inflation, polarized political strife and disillusionment, rampant far-left domestic terrorism, international terrorism, and feverish competition between media companies over the masses due to evolving technologies and expanded reach.

Although the players may have changed, the stage is indeed eerily similar.

While greedy, cutthroat corporations may seem a dime a dozen these days, one film not only exposed corporate gluttony in a way never seen before (at that time) but also largely prophesied how these conglomerations of private enterprise would vie for power, at least when it comes to legacy media outlets.

Helmed by celebrated director Sidney Lumet, 1976's "Network" is more than a scathing satirical take on the network television industry; it's a prophetic projection into the future and our turbulent current time.

The movie opens with very drunk TV anchorman Howard Beale (Peter Finch) staggering around on the streets of Manhattan with his longtime pal, equally inebriated Max Schumacher (William Holden). Both men work for the fictional TV network UBS (think: ABC, NBC, or CNN).

Beale has been delivering the evening news on the network's nightly newscast, the UBS Evening News, for over a decade, and Schumacher is the department's president.

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

Max Schumacher (William Holden, R) looking after his emotionally compromised friend Howard Beale (Peter Finch), in "Network."

'Network' is a prophetic projection into the future and our turbulent times.

Bad News

Unfortunately, Schumacher has just delivered some bad news to his chum. Because of sagging ratings, the network's higher-ups have decided to terminate Beale. Beale has just two more weeks at UBS and then he'll have to move on.

At the end of the night, the two bosom buddies find themselves at a dive bar, where Beale announces that he's going to kill himself. Not only that, but he'll perform his suicide during one of his live broadcasts on the evening news. Not taking Beale seriously, Schumacher jokingly tells his friend that at least he'll fetch some great ratings for his on-air suicide.

The next evening, Beale makes good on his promise to off himself by announcing it during his newscast, telling millions of viewers that he'll commit suicide in one week's time while live on the air.

In a humorous scene, the show's production control room staff are so wrapped up in their own petty affairs that they don't even notice Beale's announcement, at least initially.

Because of Beale's peculiar behavior, UBS management quickly moves to fire him instead of waiting for two weeks. However, his loyal friend Schumacher shields his mentally frail friend and makes it so that Beale can go out on his own terms, and in his own time. In turn, Beale tells Schumacher that he'll calmly set things right during his next broadcast, and announce his leaving the show.

Instead, during his very next show, Beale appears to go totally bonkers. Instead of delivering the evening news, he goes on a diatribe about how many things in the world are fake and full of hogwash. Needless to say, this incenses UBS's management, led by a corporate hatchetman ironically named Frank Hackett (Robert Duvall).

However, Beale's rant surprisingly strikes a chord with UBS's viewership and the network's ratings explode. Instead of firing Beale, the higher-ups decide to push the increasingly unhinged anchorman into the spotlight.

Meanwhile, the uber-ambitious, recently hired program director Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway) shrewdly begins jockeying for more control over UBS's programming. Her unconventional yet brilliant ideas begin to influence UBS's higher-ups.

Christensen decides to approach Schumacher in a bid to share her unorthodox ideas and plan with him to increase his department's ratings further. But he sees right through her power-hungry schemes. Instead of accepting her offer, sparks of romance begin to fly between the two, but can Schumacher trust this all-too-slick beautiful woman with sociopathic tendencies?

Extreme Greed

This is an outstanding drama that realistically depicts what lengths corporations will go to in order to increase their bottom lines. As this movie shows us, there is no bottom, no ethically compromised depth they will not stoop to in order to achieve their questionable aims.

For example, instead of being concerned for Beale's obviously deteriorating mental state, UBS pushes for him to be more and more outrageous just so they can keep increasing both their profits and the network's ratings, much to the dismay of Schumacher, Beale's one true friend.

The film's script was written by visionary screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky. Chayefsky had a lot of creative control of this film's production, and he insisted that its ensemble cast of actors deliver their lines in a highly realistic fashion.

Coupled with Lumet's brilliant direction, "Network" is both a highly entertaining drama with lots of laugh-out-loud humor and a film that carries some very timely messages, ones that are extremely prescient in modern times.

View this film on Redbox, Vudu, or Apple TV.

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.

'Network'

Director
Sidney Lumet

Starring
Faye Dunaway, William Holden, Peter Finch

MPAA Rating
R

Running Time
2 hours, 1 minute

Release Date
Nov. 27, 1976

★★★★½

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