

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON



"Saint Francis in Meditation," 1635-9, by Francisco de Zurbarán. Oil on canvas; 59 3/4 inches by 39 inches. The National Gallery, London.

SACRED ART

The Art of Prayer and Devotion

The National Gallery, London's exhibition of a popular saint

LORRAINE FERRIER

Around 1635, Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbarán painted "Saint Francis in Meditation," a striking life-size portrait of Francis kneeling in prayer and gazing up to God in adoration.

Zurbarán made Francis's faith palpable by painting Francis the man, without the fanfare of his miracles. Francis wears the

habit worn by the friars of the Capuchin order of Franciscans. His habit is well worn, and patched up. He's tied three knots in his belt to represent poverty, chastity, and obedience. (Two knots are seen in the painting.) He holds a skull, symbolizing the impermanence of life and Christ's crucifixion (a motif that El Greco first introduced to Spanish paintings of St. Francis).

The painting's dark background reflects Francis's ascetic life. We can almost smell the stale air. We can feel the hard stone floor he kneels upon, and the rough woolen cloth of his habit scratching against his skin.

Zurbarán used Francis's emotions to pull us into his world and made sure that the light shone on Francis's hands in prayer and his ecstatic facial expression.

The 'Saint Francis of Assisi' exhibition explores the saint's life and legacy through art.

Experts believe that Zurbarán may have created the painting for a door, a window, a private cell, or a chapel. His painting shows us the spirit of prayer and devotion, which Francis believed most important. As Francis's work spread, he issued a warning to Franciscan orders that may have overemphasized theology; he encouraged members to study, but to never "extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion."

The National Gallery, London owns Zurbarán's "Saint Francis in Meditation," and until July 30, it's part of the gallery's recently opened "Saint Francis of Assisi" exhibition, which explores the saint's life and legacy through art.

Continued on Page 4



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POETRY

The Glass Half-Full Poet

JEFF MINICK

Like millions of other immigrants to America, Edgar Albert Guest (1881–1959) worked hard, overcame adversity, made good, and loved the land that gave birth to his dreams and ambitions.

He was born in Birmingham, England. In 1891, his mother and father moved the family to Detroit, Michigan. There, at age 11, Guest began working odd jobs to help out at home when his father was temporarily unemployed. In his early teens, he found work as a copy boy at the Detroit Free Press.

When Guest was 17, his father died, and he left high school to support his family, working his way up at the paper from police reporter to columnist when in his mid-20s. By the time he was 30, nearly all his writing for the paper appeared as poems in a column titled “Breakfast Table Chat.” These daily verses soon became wildly popular and were at one time syndicated in over 300 newspapers. Published in 1916, his poetry collection “A Heap o’ Livin’” eventually sold a million copies, a phenomenal record for any book but particularly so for poetry.

Guest wrote for the Detroit paper for over 60 years, during which time he published over 11,000 poems. More than 20 volumes of his poetry were sold to the public, and his 945-page “Collected Verse,” published in 1934, found such an enthusiastic audience that it ran into 11 editions.

Widely known at the time as “the poet of the people,” he hosted a popular radio show from 1931 until 1942. And in 1951, NBC television featured him in “A Guest in Your House.”

The high school dropout had made his mark.

Of Time and the Critics

Though Edgar Guest still has fans, far fewer today remember the man who was once a household name in towns and cities across America.

This gradual erasure from the collective memory is in part the result of the changing tides of time and taste. The old is washed away, and the new rushes to shore. Most of the bestselling novelists of the first half of the 20th century, for example, are forgotten. Artists and musicians then celebrated as geniuses lie unremarked in their graves. Such is the nature of time and changes in fashion.

In the case of Guest, some contemporary critics and poets, a few of them undoubtedly jealous of his fame and success, rolled their eyes at his verse and derided it as being too simplistic, too optimistic, and far too sentimental. That evaluation remains his reputation today. In almost any encounter with Guest and his standing as a poet, such as occurs in the Encyclopedia Britannica, these adjectives with their whiff of condescension are still used to describe him.

And they’re on target. Edgar Guest’s verse was as they say: simple, optimistic, and sentimental.

Yet I would contend that these same qualities explain precisely why millions read his poetry.

Simplicity

Guest never claimed the genius of a Shakespeare or an Emily Dickinson. As he once said of his verse, “I take simple everyday things that happen to me and I figure it happens to a lot of other people and I make simple rhymes out of them.”

In the final eight lines of “My Creed,”



Edgar Guest worked for the Detroit Free Press for 60 years, publishing a poem seven days a week, and hosted a popular radio show until 1942. He’s shown here in 1935.

he gives us this summation of his code:

To leave some simple mark behind
To keep my having lived in mind;
If enmity to aught I show,
To be an honest, generous foe,
To play my little part, nor whine
That greater honors are not mine.
This, I believe, is all I need
For my philosophy and creed.

“Some simple mark” and “to play my little part” seem his frank evaluation of his own status as a poet and a man.

Optimism

Despite the Great Depression and two horrific world wars, one quality associated with the American character during that era was a confident belief in individual effort and resilience, all buoyed up by a jaunty attitude toward life. We see this outlook reflected in many of the films of the 1930s, for instance, or in books like Dale Carnegie’s 1936 “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” works that only Americans of that time could have produced.

Guest reflects and promotes these same virtues in his verse. “It Couldn’t Be Done,” which is one of his better-known meditations in meter and rhyme and was even featured in an Audi commercial some years ago, gives us this can-do American spirit:

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,
There are thousands to prophesy failure,
There are thousands to point out to you one by one,
The dangers that wait to assail you.
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing
That “cannot be done,” and you’ll do it.

Sentimentality

In the movie “Local Color,” a critic and a painter are discussing the place of sentiment in art when the critic remarks, “Sentiment is a sloppy, sugary, emotional form of gushing which is indicative of the lack of intellect.” And the painter replies, “You have so much intellect that you have become stupid, Curtis.”

Can Guest’s poetry be called sentimental? Absolutely, if by that word we mean Oxford Languages’ definition: “of or prompted by feelings of tenderness, sadness, or nostalgia.” The more limited literary meaning of sentiment adds to this definition “typically in an exaggerated or self-indulgent way.”

Those who attach sentiment to Edgar Guest’s reputation seems to favor the literary meaning of the word, which reveals that they’ve understood neither Guest nor his audience. He published his poems in a newspaper, meant to be read by men, women, and children as they sat at the breakfast table or in the den after supper, hardworking people who knew life’s joys and sorrows, its comedies and tragedies. The topics Guest addressed so frequently—family, friendship, birth, death, love of God and country—were not for them abstract concepts, but were the living realities of daily living.

Guest’s “A Child of Mine” is an exchange between God and two parents entrusted with the care and keeping of their child. To them God explains:

He’ll bring his charms to gladden you,
And should his stay be brief,
You’ll have his lovely memories,
As solace for your grief.
I cannot promise he will stay,
Since all from earth return.
At the poem’s end, the parents reply:
We’ll shelter him with tenderness,
We’ll love him while we may,
And for the happiness we’ve known,
Forever grateful stay.
But should the angels call for him,
Much sooner than we’ve planned,
We’ll brave the bitter grief that comes,
And try to understand.

Is this “a sloppy, sugary, emotional piece of gushing”? If we search out this poem on FamilyFriendlyPoems.com and scroll down, we can read the testimonies of moms and dads whose children have died and who have found comfort in



Guest’s words. Only people with a heart of stone could read these testimonials for their deceased daughters or sons and dismiss them as sloppy and sugary. Moreover, Guest knew whereof he spoke, having lost his own little girl, age 13 months.

End Notes

Critics of Guest’s poetry often forget a singular, important fact. He was a newspaper man who was proud of his life’s work. In a 1939 interview, he said: “I’ve never been late with my copy and I’ve never missed an edition. And that’s seven days a week.” Every day for three decades, the Detroit Free Press featured a poem by Guest in its pages.

Give that assignment to most poets, then or now, and they would be pulling out their hair and snapping their pencils in half before the week was ended.

“**I take simple everyday things that happen to me ... and I make simple rhymes out of them.**”

Edgar Guest

Much more important to general readers, as we read some of Guest’s poems, is whether today’s culture isn’t in need of the spirit we find in his verses. We may smile and turn away from his verse, dismissing it as trite or idealistic, and not pertinent to our own tribulations and bitter divisions, yet that would be a mistake.

Let me make this point with a piece from Guest’s “Poems of Patriotism.” This old, thin volume from 1922, which I borrowed from our local college library, was originally published a few years earlier during World War I. Here we find “The Time for Deeds,” which ends this way:

If in honor and glory our flag is to wave,
If we are to keep this—the land of the brave;
If more than fine words are to fashion our deeds,

Now must our hands and our hearts turn to deeds.

We are challenged by tyrants our strength to reveal!
Oh, God! let us prove that our courage is real!

This exhortation may be a century old, but it arrives as fresh as this morning’s headlines. Here is a call to liberty that should speak to Americans in any age.

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 nonfiction, “Learning As I Go” and “Movies Make The Man.” Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va.

TRUTH and TRADITION

In Our Own Words



“**With diligent effort, a journalist can map a part of the journey and present it to readers, hoping to help them navigate their own realities.**”

Petr Svab
Reporter

The World Through a Journalist’s Eyes

Dear Epoch VIP,

Thank you for your continuing support—we are at your service.

My name is Petr Svab and I’ve been covering politics, courts, police, immigration, economy, and other topics during my 16 years at The Epoch Times.

It is my pleasure to work for a newspaper that stands for values I can wholeheartedly endorse and fittingly summed up in our motto of Truth and Tradition.

I believe that truth is the living world, and an infinite journey of exploration. The more topics I tackle, the more issues I delve into, the more I realize how complex, multifaceted, and enormous the world truly is. We can never dream of grasping it all, but, with diligent effort, a journalist can map a part of the journey and present it to readers, hoping to help them navigate their own realities.

Moreover, I’ve found, a journalist can open doors closed to others, give readers the facts of the story, the context that enlightens them, as well as the insights of the participants.

I remember walking the streets of West Baltimore a few years ago. My plan was just to interview some local business owners to see what the city was doing about some of its issues—from piles of trash and abandoned houses to homelessness and crime.

Within five minutes of my arrival, a man on the street noticed me and started to shout: “Guy with a camera! There’s a guy with a camera here!” A group of young men further up the street took notice as I approached.

“Are you a cop?” asked one of them. He was a young man with wide eyes that looked like they’d already seen more than their share.

I introduced myself and my business of the day, handing the gentleman my card. The young man’s expression softened as he realized I was here to report on a story—the story of his home.

As it turned out, the young man was not only ready to share with me his insights on the local issues, but also to offer advice on where to find what I was looking for. We parted ways with a handshake.

In all my experience talking directly to the people

involved in various events, **the truth seldom (if ever) favors partisan narratives—it’s much more colorful: sometimes humorous, other times tragic.**

Consider the story, for example, of Trayvon Martin. According to some, an innocent child killed by a racist man. According to others, a thug killed in self-defense. But after filmmaker Joel Gilbert retraced Martin’s last moments, weeks, and months, it turned out neither narrative was quite true. Gilbert told a story of a young man whose life was falling apart and ultimately plunged into a tragedy that nobody wanted.

So if that’s truth, what is tradition, then? For me, it is the lessons of history. It’s the distilled universal wisdom collected by our ancestors over millennia—the timeless lessons of the enlightened, the sages, and the saints. This treasure chest of the past is where we can turn to help us better understand the truth at present.

My work is to safeguard this treasure, let it live through the pages of The Epoch Times and the hearts of our readers.

While it may seem the foundations of the civilization itself are now under attack, I truly believe our readers will be best equipped to withstand the storm—through clarity and peace of heart. For whatever the future holds, I believe the path will be less treacherous for those who walk it steadily, making choices informed both by truth and tradition.

What I pledge to you is yet more meticulous research, analysis, and fact-finding. I’ll do the digging for you, while letting you make up your own mind. Furthermore, I’ll also hone my wit to give you an ever-better read along the way. Yes, we strive to be an influential media in the world, but **I believe that our true success is measured in minds sharpened, hearts uplifted, and lives improved.**

Once again, thank you for joining us on this journey. We do live in truly epochal times, wouldn’t you say?

In Truth and Tradition,

Petr Svab
The Epoch Times

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Edgar Guest wrote for the Detroit paper for over 60 years, during which time he published over 11,000 poems.



"Saint Francis of Assisi and the Heavenly Melody," 1904, by Frank Cadogan Cowper. Oil on canvas; 36 1/2 inches by 29 5/8 inches. Private Collection.

SACRED ART

The Art of Prayer and Devotion

Continued from Page 1

Over 40 artworks from the 13th century to the present day are on display, from European and American public and private collections.

One of the remarkable objects on display is a piece of Francis's habit, kept in a Baroque gilt frame. Franciscan brothers took vows of poverty, and the habit is one of its most visible signs. Experts found that some parts of Francis's other habits were patched up by St. Clare, who led the women's Franciscan order of the Poor Clares.

A Universal Saint

Around 1181, Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone (Francis) was born in Assisi to a wealthy silk merchant. Francis served as a soldier, spent time as a prisoner of war, and in 1219 he preached to the Sultan of Egypt. Francis is remembered throughout the world for his love of nature, his devoutness, and his many miracles.

St. Francis led by example. "His character stood out by virtue of its many contrasts. His piety, at once solitary and popular, his character, at once sweet and austere, his appearance, at once humble and striking, have remained unforgettable," wrote literary critic Erich Auerbach, as cited in the exhibition book.

Sacred Art

Artists have portrayed St. Francis of Assisi more than any other saint, except for New Testament saints. In the century after his death, some 20,000 images of Francis may have been created, an estimate that doesn't include illuminated manuscripts.

Medieval artists depicted St. Francis's miracles during his life and after his death that confirmed his sainthood. A vita-retable (a panel showing a central figure flanked by episodes of that person's life) made around 1253, titled "Saint Francis and Four Posthumous Miracles," demonstrates this well. Standing in the center, St. Francis looks like a Byz-

antine saint as he's flanked by images of his posthumous miracles.

Later, Counter-Reformation artists focused on St. Francis's faith and spirituality, especially depicting him rapt in ecstasy, such as seen in Zurbarán's "Saint Francis in Meditation."

Surrendering to God's Will

A couple of Northern Renaissance paintings in the exhibition show Francis receiving the stigmata when he prayed at La Verna, an isolated retreat on Mount Verna, in northern Italy. Around 1507, Albrecht Altdorfer chose a palette of muted earth tones for his painting "Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata." In the painting, the saint seems to almost disappear into the landscape, perhaps alluding to how Francis saw himself as one of God's many creations.



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"Saint Francis Before the Sultan," 1429, by Fra Angelico. Tempera on panel; 11 inches by 12 1/4 inches. Lindenau Museum, Altenburg in Germany.

Looking at Altdorfer's painting, we can almost feel a gentle breeze carrying the fresh scent from the beech tree forest nearby and see birds playing overhead, singing as if to praise the sunshine. Brother Francis had meditated there many times before. But that day was different. The awestruck brother couldn't believe his eyes. He saw a vision of God high in the heavens as a six-winged seraph, which is an angelic being in direct communication with God. The seraph placed its wings in a cross: It raised two wings, readied two wings for flight, and wrapped the other two wings around its body.

Altdorfer depicted Francis's faith as he held his palms outward, surrendering to receive the stigmata, the five wounds mirroring the wounds of Christ's crucifixion. The artist used lines that look like conduits from heaven to show that the wounds were ordained directly by God.

A century after Altdorfer's piece, in 1620, Frans Pourbus the Younger's painting titled "Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata" showed the legend unfolding like a storybook. In the background, Francis is seen just after the seraph appeared to him. He's awestruck to such an extent that he has fallen to the ground. He shields his eyes from the divine light that falls from the seraph in heaven. In the foreground, we can see Francis rapt in ecstasy, receiving the stigmata.

There are no lines from heaven, as in Altdorfer's painting. Instead, Pourbus the Younger uses the light to softly bring our attention to Francis's hands as he shows us the wounds on his palms.

Guiding Souls to Heaven

Biographer and theologian Donald Spoto wrote in his book "Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi" that "throughout the Middle Ages, birds were often used to represent souls, because they can fly up to God."

In the exhibition, we can see how artists showed Francis preaching to birds. St. Francis loved all of God's creations, and he guided them to love their creator. "He came upon a large flock of birds and spoke to them as though they were rational beings, saying: 'My brother birds, you owe a great debt of praise to your Creator, who clothes you with feathers, gives you wings to fly with, grants you the purity of the air, and without effort on your part he sustains you,'" wrote chronicler and archbishop of Genoa Jacobus de Voragine in the popular medieval religious text "The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints." Having captured the birds' attention, Francis preached to them, sending them on their way when he finished.

We can also see Francis and the birds centuries later in English artist Frank Cadogan Cowper's 1904 painting titled "St. Francis of Assisi and the Heavenly Melody." Cowper's painting retells a miraculous event near the end of Francis's life. Francis asked one of the brothers to play the lute for him, but the brother believed that it went against the order's vows. Heaven stepped in and provided the solace Francis sought when an angel appeared and played a melody for him. Cowper painted Francis surrounded by birds and comforted by the angel's melody.

Spoto ended his biography: "In describing his last moments, Francis's friends never forgot one detail: 'Many birds, called larks, flew low above the roof of the house where he lay, wheeling in a circle and singing.'"

The "Saint Francis of Assisi" exhibition at The National Gallery, London runs until July 30. To find out more, visit NationalGallery.org.uk

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE OF THE SACRED CONVENT OF S. FRANCESCO IN ASSISI, ITALY



"Saint Francis and Four Posthumous Miracles," circa 1253, by Master of the Treasury. Tempera and gold on panel; 45 1/4 inches by 63 inches by 5 1/2 inches. Treasury Museum of the Basilica of St. Francis, in Assisi, Italy.

JORG P. ANDERS/PICTURE GALLERY, STATE MUSEUMS IN BERLIN



"Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata," 1507, by Albrecht Altdorfer. Oil on canvas; 9 1/2 inches by 8 1/4 inches. Picture Gallery, State Museums in Berlin.

In the century after his death, some 20,000 images of St. Francis may have been created.

GERARD BLOT/RMN-GRAND PALAIS, LOUVRE MUSEUM



"Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata," 1620, by Frans Pourbus the Younger. Oil on canvas, 89 3/8 inches by 63 3/4 inches; Louvre Museum, Paris.

PHOTO SCALA, FLORENCE/EPK/PICTURE AGENCY FOR ART, CULTURE AND HISTORY, BERLIN



"Allegory of Francis and Lady Poverty," circa 1460, by Vecchieta and workshop. Tempera on poplar; 11 5/8 inches by 7 1/8 inches. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

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"Description of the Sacred Mount of Verna," 1612, by Fra Lino Moroni. Printed book with 24 engravings after Jacopo Ligozzi. The British Library, London.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Dreams Deferred Aren't Always Dead

RUDOLPH LAMBERT FERNANDEZ

Lorraine Hansberry begins her award-winning play with one word that describes the living room of a poor, mid-20th-century black household: weariness. Weariness has won, Hansberry writes of her characters' living room, because everything in it has been sat on, used, and scrubbed too often. All pretenses have long since vanished from it. A table here or maybe a chair there has been shifted over the years to hide a worn carpet. Unsurprisingly, weariness and hiding permeate the movie that Hansberry's play inspired.

A windfall in the form of a life insurance check compels the needy Younger family to sift want from need. And as if that were not enough, its tantalizing promise of a better life within their grasp, yet somehow out of reach, forces them to decide what their values are.

Matriarch Lena (Claudia McNeil) fancies buying a house that she and her now dead husband never could. Her son, Walter Lee (Sidney Poitier), fancies rising from chauffeur to investing. His wife, Ruth (Ruby Dee), imagines that a newer, larger place will give son Travis the space he needs to thrive. Lena's daughter, Beneatha (Diana Sands), dreams of becoming a doctor, with a respectable suitor in tow.

The family's resilience flows precisely from their togetherness.

Thanks to Walter's wantonness, the family risks losing it all. They've hidden their wants for so long that their needs and values now lie bare. It's like someone's wrapped a giant plastic bag over the entire house. Walter is "choking," but everyone else is suffocating, too. They're looking for a door, a window, just to breathe. The drudgery, the waiting is nearly killing them. Only, it doesn't.

Ruth has to haul herself out of bed each morning, heave little Travis off the couch (doubling up as his bed), and snarl at Walter until he rises, too, so they can all quickly



(L-R) Walter Lee (Sidney Poitier), Lena (Claudia McNeil), Ruth (Ruby Dee), and Beneatha (Diana Sands), in 1961's "A Raisin in the Sun."

use the common bathroom in the corridor outside, before neighbors get there. The kitchen also houses the dining table, while the dining room houses the couch. They're walking in on other conversations that they'd much rather hide from each other. They're conspiring against others to earn as much as they do. They're conspiring against each other, so they don't have to put off their pet projects.

A Mother's Wisdom

Yet amid despair, there's hope. The toughest lessons come from Lena. She reminds them that money—the having or hoarding of it or the losing of it—isn't everything. When they wonder what's left to love in each other when they're being denied their aspirations, she reminds them how cowardly it is to love only when someone fulfills your wishes.

Lena worries that her children struggle with their sense of self worth because they lack the ability to buy things at will. She recalls that it isn't the material things one bequeathes to children that instill in them a sense of personhood, but the values one lives by. When she watches young Travis

looking up at his father as a possible role model, she realizes that it isn't too late to reinforce the right values.

Lena turns on Beneatha for turning on her brother, Walter. "Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in himself 'cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right. ... Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is."

It's hard for any co-star to shine alongside the incandescent Poitier, but Dee, McNeil, and Sands do. They paint an agonizing portrait of individuals dying to strike out on their own but finding that their hope of a better future and their resilience flows precisely from their togetherness. Slowly, painfully, even humorously, they learn to embrace opportunities to love more, live more, and to whine (a little) less about their infuriatingly elusive dreams.

Lena's words will haunt everyone who's

ever lived in poverty: "Sometimes you just got to know when to give up some things and hold on to what you got." Hansberry's point, as screenwriter, is that these characters ought to haunt those who've never lived in poverty, too, generating empathy and generosity toward those who don't enjoy the luxury of choice that they do.

Rudolph Lambert Fernandez is an independent writer who writes on pop culture. He may be reached at Twitter: @Rudolph-Fernandez

'A Raisin in the Sun'

Director
Daniel Petrie

Starring
Claudia McNeil, Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee

Running Time
2 hours, 8 minutes

MPAA Rating
PG

Release Date
May 29, 1961

★★★★★

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