

Blessed Are the Pure of Art

Written by Margaret Evans

"These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't." - Dylan Thomas



The arts have been on my mind, lately. Maybe it's because fall in Beaufort is Art Season, that energetic time of year when all the galleries start hanging new exhibits and throwing great parties. Maybe it's because my daughter's now a third grader at Lady's Island Elementary, and third grade's the year when an "arts-integrated education" really starts to strut its stuff. (Not only does Amelia take a special arts class every day, as she has since kindergarten, but she's now added "audition-only" classes to her weekly repertoire, including Musical Theatre, Clowning, and TACT, an advanced visuals arts course.) Maybe it's because my daughter and I are performing in our first play together in a couple of weeks, or because my husband's directing "Arsenic & Old Lace" for BPA in November...

Or maybe it's because the arts have been in the news. Back in August, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) – along with the White House Office of Public Engagement and the Corporation for National and Community Service – hosted a conference call with a group of select artists, all of whom had been instrumental in President Obama's election campaign.

Yosi Sargent, then communications director for the NEA, asked these artists to pick an issue, any issue – on Obama's agenda, that is – and promote the administration's position through their work.

Now, even if you're a big fan of government funding for the arts, it's hard to deny there's something a little fishy here. Blogger Patrick Courrielche, a filmmaker, marketer, and art community consultant based in Los Angeles – who goes out of his way to stress that he's not a "rightwing nut job" – puts it this way: "The NEA tainted the creative process by encouraging the art community to address highly controversial political issues. This practice has never been the historical role of the NEA. The NEA's role is to support excellence in the arts, to increase access to the arts, and to be a leader in arts education. Using the arts to address contentiously debated issues is political subversion. And the fact that the White House played a role in encouraging the arts to address contentious issues should also be considered a government overreach.... Setting up a propaganda machine is a dangerous precedent."

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The fact that the NEA is the largest national granter of funding to artists like the ones in question doesn't help matters. Can you spell "conflict of interest"? Apparently, lots of folks can. When the news broke, the NEA immediately began distancing itself from this conference call, and communications director Yosi Sargent has now been "reassigned" to another position within the organization.

Government funding for the arts has always been a complicated issue for me. As a creator, consumer, promoter of, and 'true believer' in the arts, I am passionately eager to see them thrive. But as anybody who knows the embattled history of the NEA can tell you, I'm not the first to wonder: Do the feds and the arts really make good bedfellows? Can government patronage really stay free of politics? Where is the line between art and propaganda?

I asked S, an old college friend who's been an arts administrator for over fifteen years, to share her thoughts on this recent NEA incident. Her take: "Art that promotes something besides itself is an advertisement, no matter how moving, cool or enjoyable. It's the difference between the Gap's Jump-Jive-Wail commercials and Swan Lake. My personal belief is that the government should provide roads, armies and a few other things with tax revenues. However, after my 17 + years as an arts administrator, I know the market can't, or won't, fully support the arts, especially performing arts."

Huh. So, in order for art to flourish, it needs government funding, but government funding endangers the quality the art? A true conundrum.

Another friend, G, doesn't think so. He believes our marching orders are clear:

"If we had a monarchy, one might be able to make the argument that the head of government is the ultimate patron. But in a democratic Republic, founded in liberty and private property rights, the idea that the government should be able to take wealth from its citizens to fund the particular political agenda of whomever gained power is repugnant. Funding arts production is not the proper or even moral role of government."

I don't necessarily agree with G that the government shouldn't fund arts production, but I definitely agree that if it does, that art must *never* be seen as promoting a controversial political

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agenda under debate (even if the artist supports that agenda, which is highly likely during this administration). I'm fine with artists speaking truth to power, but truth

for

power? That

makes me uncomfortable. The problem is, how do you keep the relationship between funder and fundee pure... both for the sake of the republic

and

the art? Murky waters, indeed.

And just to make 'em murkier, let's throw in a little Church with our State. Also in the news this week: Pope Benedict has invited 500 artists – including U2 front man Bono, Italian film score composer Ennio Morricone, and avant-garde theater director Bob Wilson – to meet with him on November 21 in the Sistine Chapel. The meeting is part of a concerted effort by the Catholic Church to help re-establish the special historical relationship between faith and art. I wish the Pope luck. I really do. But let's face it – the 21

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Century is no Renaissance, and Benedict's no Barack. I fear he'll have trouble convincing these artists to take up his cause. It's a shame, too, because the Catholic Church has sponsored so many of the great artistic achievements of Western Civilization, proving itself a worthy patron again and again.

Of course, a church is just as capable of creating a "propaganda machine" as is a government, and in this increasingly secular age, that interpretation of the Pope's actions is probably inevitable. Again, I think that's a shame. For me, the connection between faith and art, unlike the one between politics and art, seems very organic... almost undeniable.

For many years – decades actually – Art, both creating it and consuming it – was the closest thing I had to religious faith. Every now and then I'd encounter a movie scene, a musical sequence, an image on canvas, a sentence, even a phrase, that I suspected – when I allowed myself to 'go there' – was somehow... divinely inspired. I'll never forget the day that feeling of "almost there, but not quite" became something more. It was nearly three years ago, At Christmastime, and I was sitting on the front row at First Presbyterian Church. I'd been invited by some good friends – friends who knew I didn't "do church" but that I loved music – to come and hear their choir perform The Messiah. As I sat listening to this glorious, otherworldly sound pouring forth from the mouths of these very normal, everyday people –

people just like me

–

I was suddenly struck with this... knowledge. I

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knew

– and it was a whole different kind of knowing –

that there was a God,

and that He had created this music just as surely as He'd created the heavens and the Earth, and that He'd done it with the help of his willing servant, George Frideric Handel. I was overwhelmed by this knowledge. It felt like my heart was cracking open.

It was literally painful. I felt layers of arrogance, callousness, and ironic detachment falling away: I might as well have been sitting there naked. I was frightened... exhilarated.

Humbled. (I think I may have actually “trembled.”) When the performance was over and the benediction said, I pulled myself together, wiped the mascara streaks from my face, had my friend introduce me to her choir director, and asked to join his band of willing servants.

So, is Handel's Messiah propaganda? If so, it's God's propaganda. His calling card. An advertisement of His existence. In fact, I kind of suspect that's what all true art is, even if we, the artists and art consumers, don't always know it. In the coming secular age, as “religion” fades, I believe art will be more important than ever, as people struggle, as they always have, to find empathy, compassion, a common morality, and a sense of the meaning.

We live in a society that's growing more and more fragmented, where individualism and tribalism are, ironically, both on the rise... where politics, and even religion, only seem to divide us further. But art – *pure* art – still has the power to bind us together in our common humanity, enlightening our minds and filling our hearts with love and understanding. It might just be our last, great hope.