



CHARACTER

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Ethics in Art and Film

Pictures on the Wall

By Dr. Steven Tigner

Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac*

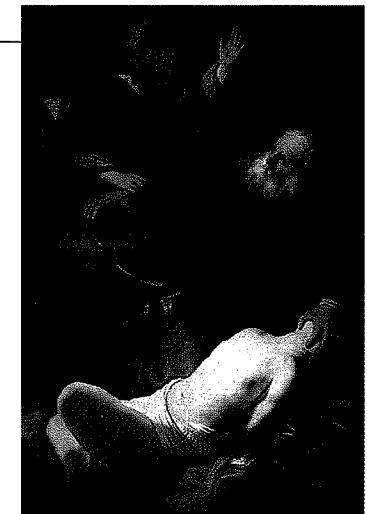
Film directors sometimes significantly enhance their sets with art that is more than decorative. Pete Jones's *Stolen Summer*, released in the winter of 2002, came out of "Project Greenlight," the first-time director competition established by Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, and Miramax. In a scene initiating the final downward-turning development in the plot, Patrick O'Malley (Eddie Kaye) visits Rabbi Kenneth Jacobsen (Kevin Pollak) in his

study. Rabbi Jacobsen is just leaving in order to be with his hospitalized son, Danny (Mike Weinberg), who has suffered a relapse in his fight with leukemia. Danny had befriended Patrick's younger brother, Pete (Adi Stein).

On the wall of Rabbi Jacobsen's study is a large, framed print of Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac* (though the Rabbi would call it the *Binding of Isaac*). Like Abraham in Rembrandt's painting, Rabbi Jacobsen is, himself, facing what appears to be the imminent death of his son.

But perhaps there is hope? With characteristic care, Rembrandt has chosen the precise moment in the narrative in Genesis 22 where the angel stays Abraham's hand and his knife is dropping to the ground: "The LORD will provide." Will the life of Danny be similarly spared?

As the director no doubt intended, informed and sympathetic viewers will find their own natural hopes heightened by the background presence of Rembrandt's redemptive painting, but



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635.

this only enhances the poignancy of Danny's death when it comes.

The end is not without hope, however. While the friendship between the two theologically naïve boys—one an Irish-Catholic and the other a Jewish Rabbi's son—ends when Danny dies, the invisible walls that once separated their families and their worlds have been significantly breached. Patrick O'Malley now has the opportunity to attend college with scholarship aid administered by Rabbi Jacobsen, and the fog of prejudice has begun to lift.

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John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*

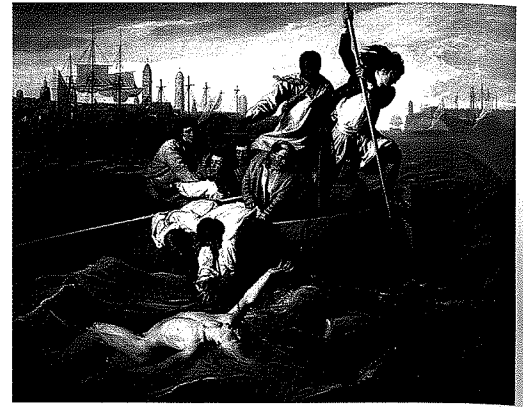
Brook Watson was fourteen years old and working on a British merchant ship anchored in Havana Harbor when he decided to go for a swim. The year was 1749. Nine other members of the crew were already sitting in the ship's boat waiting for their captain and so were able to respond immediately when they spied Watson being attacked by a shark some two hundred yards off. While they rowed furiously to his rescue, they could not reach him until the shark had pulled Watson under three times and

had taken off most of his right leg below the knee. Watson survived, however, and was later fitted with a wooden leg in Boston. He moved to Canada and then—ten years after the shark attack—settled in London. In later years he was elected to Parliament, became a director of the Bank of England, Lord Mayor of London, and Chairman of Lloyds of London. It was also partly his tea that was dumped into Boston Harbor in 1773 during the Boston Tea Party.

Watson met the American painter John Singleton Copley in London in 1774. Some time after Copley's return to London following a year's study in Italy, Watson commissioned Copley to paint the dramatic rescue that had happened nearly three decades earlier. The result was Copley's famous *Watson and the Shark*, dated 1778. Three renditions may be seen in American museums—two large, horizontally oriented versions are on display in the National Gallery in Washington and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a third, smaller, vertically oriented version is in the Detroit Institute of Art.

Brook Watson himself saw the painting as embodying a moral lesson of encouragement in the face of adversity. He bequeathed *Watson and the Shark* to Christ's Hospital in London in 1803, hoping that "the said worthy Governours... will allow it to be hung up in the Hall of their Hospital as holding out a most useful Lesson to Youth [sic]."¹

We encounter a framed print of the painting on the wall of Mrs. Wilberforce's (Katie Johnson's) house as she is showing it to Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness), a potential renter, in the 1955 classic, *The Lady Killers*. No overt notice is taken of the picture on the wall—any more than notice is taken of Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac in Stolen Summer*—but its message of hope in the face of adversity is clearly intended. Though in mortal danger, Mrs. Wilberforce will—like Brook Watson—survive!



John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark*, 1778.

[1] Ellen G. Miles, "John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*" (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993) unpaginated.

Susanna and the Elders

When Shylock calls the disguised Portia "a second Daniel" in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, he is obliquely referring to Daniel's early-won reputation for judgment in the story of Susanna and the Elders (one of two Greek additions to the Hebrew text of the biblical book of Daniel).

In the story, two lusty elders spy on Susanna while she is bathing, eventually entrapping her with threats. She spurns the elders' advances, however, even though their false testimony will surely condemn her to death by stoning. The young Daniel saves the righteous Susanna by exposing the elders' lies.

The peephole used by Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in the office of the Bates Motel in Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller, *Psycho* (1960), is covered with a picture of Susanna and the Elders. Like the elders in the story, he spies on the bathing "Marie Samuels" (Janet Leigh). And—like the elders—he, too, will be brought to justice. ❖

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By Dr. Bernice Lerner

Ethics in the Eye of the Beholder

Art and film can be interpreted through an ethical lens. I recently saw the movie *Keeping Up with the Steins* (2006). It concerns a boy who is about to have his bar mitzvah, and his parents who want the accompanying party to surpass their neighbors' extravaganza in honor of their son's respective coming of age gala. The twelve-year-old protagonist is confused. He does not want a giant theme party. In efforts to distract his competitive father, he sends an invitation to his estranged grandfather, who had years ago abandoned his family. Sure enough, the surprise appearance of the grandfather upsets the boy's father. What unfolds is a story that will resonate with those who have known or experienced pained relationships.

While certain of the film's moral messages are apparent (e.g., the boy convinces his parents to plan for a more modest and meaningful celebration), a deeper look brings each character's virtues and vices to the fore. For example, the grandfather displays irresponsibility, and later, humility and repentance; the grandmother, compassion; the father, an irascible temperament, and then temperance; the boy, wisdom.

When we discern the presence or absence of virtue in that which we behold, we exercise judgment. We gain positive examples to which we may refer—or refine our sense of what we would not do—in navigating similar situations. Ethics in the eye of the beholder? Yes. Beyond a subjective treatment on the order of enjoying or disliking a film, painting, theatrical per-

formance, or television program, there are objective truths about human frailty and strength for which we can search. We can ask:

- Why was this piece worth (or not worth) its creator's time and efforts?
- What should we know about the larger context of the moments/events portrayed?
- What do the protagonists' choices reveal about their characters?
- What might we do if—taking a leap of the moral imagination—we found ourselves in a similar situation?
- What would the right course of action look like?

Third-year medical students at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine visit New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to practice taking a long moment with what they behold. The outing is designed to improve their diagnostic skills. One of the course's instructors, art educator Rebecca Hirschwerk, chooses to show them artwork that depicts a fateful moment of decision, such as Nicolaes Maes's *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ismael* (1653).¹ Like Abraham, the medical students will one day have to make weighty choices.

Museums, according to Malcolm Rogers, chairman of the Centennial Conference of the American Association of Museums and director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, "possess infinite and often unexpected possibilities for inspiration, reflection, and



Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870–73.

insight." They "trace the creativity and resilience of people across centuries and civilizations" and "embody much of what is best and most enduring in the human spirit."² In an exhibit at New York's Guggenheim Museum this past fall, I encountered the vitality and historic scope of Russian art. One nineteenth-century piece impressed me as a particularly strong example of art as condemnation of injustice: Ilya Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870–73). Twelve individuals, strapped together, form the human engine attached to a distant ship. Their realistic, forlorn shapes seem—save for one indignant individual in the center—to be utterly defeated. One is appalled at the brutality of the absent oppressor.

In viewing tragedy we are propelled into the moral realm. I frequently introduce teachers to the great sixteenth-century painter and storyteller, Pieter Bruegel. In his *Landscape With the Fall of Icarus*, Bruegel interprets the ancient Greek myth in which a youth, Icarus, defies paternal admonitions. Rather than follow his father's trajectory as they make their airborne escape from captivity, Icarus chooses his own path and subsequently plunges into the water

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below. According to the myth, a fisherman, ploughman, and mountain shepherd stare in disbelief at the two figures in the sky. According to Bruegel, these three observers choose not to see Icarus's plight, but rather forge ahead with their respective occupations. I ask teachers whether they can see themselves in the painting; whether they have ever chosen to ignore a large and important event in the interest of pursuing their own rigid agenda. Bruegel reminds us what human decency means.

Art of all kinds furnishes abundant opportunities to see others and ourselves through an ethical lens. Training in interpretation can help young people to behold not only beauty, but also truth; to derive not only pleasure, but also edification. ❖

[1] Randy Kennedy, "Using Art to Train Doctors' Eyes," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2006, pp. B1, B7.

[2] Malcolm Rogers, "Museums' Inspiring Moments," *The Boston Globe*, April 28, 2006, p. A17.

This article was published in *Teachers College Record*, July 11, 2006. www.tcrecord.org



Pieter Bruegel, *Landscape With the Fall of Icarus*, 1558.

By Barbara Israel Bortniker

Life Lessons in Art

In education, as in love and friendship, the most unplanned circumstances sometimes yield the most satisfying results. A perfect example of this occurred recently when my son and I unexpectedly found ourselves with a free afternoon. My son's cancelled social plans coincided with a glowing newspaper review of the Andrew Wyeth retrospective at the Philadelphia Art

strengthen family bonds and gain a broader perspective on life.

Although my son was hardly enthusiastic, he agreed to come along after some negotiation involving our driving him to a concert the next week and his choice of snacks for the trip. Plugged into his iPod during the entire ride, he began to perk up once we passed the impressive fountains and climbed the

Despite [my son's] predetermination that this day would be endured rather than enjoyed, he surveyed the statuary and friezes adorning the buildings and entranceway of the museum with awe.

Museum. In a moment of inspiration, I suggested that we hop in the car and take a two-hour drive to see this celebration of a unique American master at the pinnacle of his career.

Granted, "fifteen-year-old boy" and "art museum" are not phrases often found in the same sentence, and rarely are teenagers seen with their parents in public except in compulsory situations preceded by significant grumbling. Nevertheless, we have always insisted on maintaining a certain balance in our family's calendar, including visits to some appropriate adult venues along with the more usual youth-oriented activities. We believe that in areas of social life and culture, children of every age need parental guidance and standards if they are to learn flexibility, respect for others, and open-mindedness. Difficult as it may be sometimes, parents and teenagers who can find ways to enjoy each other's company

massive stairway to the museum. Despite his predetermination that this day would be endured rather than enjoyed, he surveyed the statuary and friezes adorning the buildings and entranceway of the museum with awe.

"Wow!" he said in wonder and surprise.

What caught his attention were heroic male and female nude sculptures in the Roman style. Neither of us was uncomfortable in our joint presence of such nudity, however, as we might have been under different circumstances. These sculptures, like the painted figures we saw later, were dynamic, depicting struggle and triumph; or emotionally evocative, resonating with pathos. How different from the aggressive, exploitative images constantly bombarding youth in advertising and music videos, I thought. Here was an

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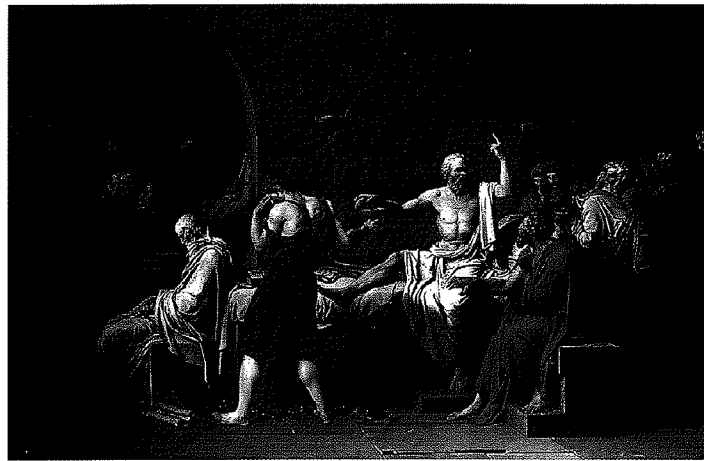
Envisioning Virtue: A Consideration of David's Image of *The Death of Socrates*

By Frank Martin

The perception of artwork in any given culture may vary drastically according to the interests, traditions, and ideals of the particular society in which works of art may be found. This level of complexity is further exaggerated by the individual responses of specific observers. In Western cultures based upon the European model, the period of the late eighteenth century generated interest in discovering examples of virtuous behavior as recorded in literature from the ancient past, and the representation of visual themes based on the concept of "noble" action became a significant emphasis of the consequent movement in art and literature known as "Neo-classicism."

As its name suggests, Neo-classicism employed the literary traditions and culture of the classical Greek and Roman past as its principal source of inspiration. Without question, a master artist working in the Neo-classical style was the famous French painter Jacques-Louis David, who explored various visual representations of virtuous action. Among David's most powerful works is a painting completed in 1787 which treats a highly charged political theme that influenced the social ambience leading up to the Revolution against the French monarchy of 1789.¹ This famous masterwork, housed in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, is entitled *The Death of Socrates*.

David's impressive image of the great philosopher, shown at the crucial



Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787.

moment in his personal history when he confirms his decision to accept death over the injustice of administrative tyranny and hypocrisy, falls into the category of the *exemplum virtutis*—or *example of virtue*—a theme that had become quite familiar to art lovers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²

In this compelling representation—which personifies virtue in action—restraint, logic, and rationalism are implied not only by the overt theme but also by the work's formal arrangement, due to the artist's clearly rendered, dramatically illuminated figures, shown with sculptural realism and precision. Socrates is placed in the center of the composition, reaching for the lethal kylix (the low cup containing the poison he is condemned to imbibe), demonstrating a heroic disinterest in his worldly fate, concerned solely with the principles of freedom, and his compliance with, respect for, and obligation to

the laws of his native Athens. Evidently, Socrates is not merely resigned to accept the law but appears internally compelled to adhere to his legally binding—if unjust—death sentence.³ At his feet, his disciple Plato sits in a pose of dejection, and other mourners gather in homage to the distinguished "father of dialectics," including Crito, seated at his right, and Apollodorus, in the background with arms raised in grief at the prospect of his mentor's imminent demise.⁴ Through the archway giving entry to the prison, David has depicted Socrates's wife, Xanthippe, departing from the scene with two other mourners, her hand raised in a gesture of farewell as she leaves her husband to posterity, surrounded by his intellectual and spiritual disciples.

Socrates's condemnation to death had been brought about by his forceful criticism of the democratic society in which he lived and its official institutions. At the time, Athens was recovering from

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war with the rival state of Sparta, and political uncertainties led to the Athenian public court's susceptibility to being induced by three leading public figures to try Socrates for corrupting the youth of Athens and turning them away from pious observance of the traditional gods (and, by implication, making them lose respect for local administrators).⁵ Socrates was found guilty and condemned. In the painting his shackles are loosened because he had been given the opportunity to escape; indeed, his critics never thought that he would accept and

embarrassed the prominent Athenians he had publicly questioned. They turned against him and their foolishness led, at least in part, to the accusations and charges of wrongdoing. Thus, at the age of 70, Socrates died willingly, accepting the judgment of his peers and lecturing on the immorality of the human spirit.⁶ As a consequence, the name of Socrates has entered posterity associated with the ideas of reverence for the search for truth, for self-sacrifice in pursuit of a moral ideal. His execution has been hailed as a significant

A work of art may be used as an instrument for moral insight and guidance during troubled times.

comply with the sentence, and supposed that he would flee for his life, going into exile away from his native Athens.

Plato offers an account of Socrates's compelling defense speech in his *Apology*. In the course of his defense, Socrates explains the circumstances that led to his rigorous method of inquiry within the city of Athens. His quest for knowledge began when his friend Chaerephon inquired of the famous Delphic Oracle if there were anyone in the world wiser than Socrates; the Oracle's negative response caused Socrates to interpret this response as a riddle and he consequently set out to find those individuals who were wiser than he. His questions to the Athenian elite concerning their knowledge of good, beauty, and virtue produced disappointing results. Discovering their limitations (despite their convictions of their own knowledge and importance), Socrates concludes that his own wisdom stemmed from an awareness of his own ignorance and limitations. Socrates's superior deductive reasoning power

model of free speech. David chose to depict Socrates's death—an allusion to standing up for moral right—during a historical moment of excess, self-indulgence, and abuse on the part of authorities.

In conclusion, *The Death of Socrates* is an exceptional example of how a work of art may be used as an instrument for moral insight and guidance during troubled times. By eloquently envisioning this decisive moment in the history of the human search for a higher moral good, Jacques-Louis David provides the contemporary observer with more than a mere opportunity for reflection and meditation. Socrates's quest goes beyond concern for personal safety or comfort, providing a tangible model of striving toward a moral goal. David offers a source of inspiration which connects the contemporary viewer of this great work with the most elevated ideals, values, intentions, and possibilities for virtuous action, a part of our complex cultural legacy. ❖

[1] Jacques-Louis David's political associations and involvement in the French Revolution have been exhaustively discussed in many sources; however, Antoine Schnapper offers an insightful overview of the combination of political agenda and creation of images in his essay "La Revolution," in the text of Antoine Schnapper, Arlette Serullaz, et al. Jacques-Louis David 1748–1825, Paris, Editions de la Reunion des musees nationaux, London, 1989, pp. 207–357.

[2] See Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 73 for a discussion of Socrates's suicide as an example of virtue and its location in the prison setting as an allusion to contemporary political developments.

[3] Although Socrates's sentence is assigned by judgment of the city of Athens—and thus the state—the charges brought against him were in large part due to the unpopularity of his actions rather than any actual or specific harm to the citizens of the state of Athens brought about by his teaching. But as a citizen, Socrates abides by the law and judgment passed onto him by the city administration, despite spurious motivations supporting his sentencing. For details, see arguments made at the trial of Socrates as recorded by Plato in his *Apology*. See Robert Paul Wolf (ed), *Ten Great Works of Philosophy*, New York, The New American Library, 1969, pp. 11–36.

[4] See Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harper & Row Publishers*, p. 387 for the identification of Plato and Crito. For the identification of the figure with raised arms as Apollodorus, see Schnapper, Serullaz, et al. Jacques-Louis David 1748–1825, p. 180. The painting by David shows twelve individuals present at the scene intended to draw a parallel to the twelve disciples of Christ (a comparable image of self-sacrifice for a potential higher good); however, more names were listed in the account of the death of Socrates by Plato in his text from the book *Phaedo*. See Wolf (ed), *Ten Great Works of Philosophy*, 1969, p. 50, where the witness, Phaedo, explains to the disciple Echerates the events surrounding the death of their mentor. Plato is noted as having been ill and absent, and, in addition to Phaedo himself, the list includes: Apollodorus, Critobulus, Crito, Hermogenes, Epigenes, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Ctesippus, and Menexenus as the native Athenians present. Of the non-Athenians, Simmias of Thebes, Cebes, Phaedondes, Euclid, Terpsion of Megara, and perhaps others are present, since this list was from Phaedo's recollection of at least 15 individuals.

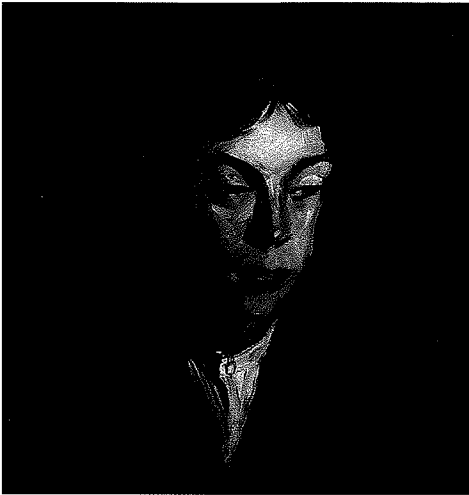
[5] Reference, Wikipedia summary online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial_of_Socrates. For reference to the three accusers, see Wolf (ed), *Ten Great Works of Philosophy*, 1969, p. 18, where, in the *Apology*, Socrates cites the three accusers by name and rationale as: Meletus, whose quarrel is on behalf of the poets; Anytus, whose quarrel is on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians; and, finally, Lycon, who represents the rhetoricians. Socrates cites his "plainness of speech" as the source of the ire of his detractors.

[6] See Wolf (ed), *Ten Great Works of Philosophy*, New York, The New American Library, 1969, pp. 11–61.

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Ethics in Political Art

By Lauren K. Terry



Henry J. Glintenkamp, *A Portrait of a Newsboy*, 1911.

Throughout the history of art, artists have used their medium to portray social and political beliefs—whether conservative and pro-government or left-wing and anarchist. Art's evocative nature permits the artist to express his or her views without didacticism, making it a powerful catalyst for social and political change. Through the study of politically motivated art, we are given the opportunity to explore not just history, but also the moral dilemmas artists faced—which in turn solicit our own moral thoughtfulness as viewers.

One group of artists that desired to promote ethical awareness among their viewers was the Ashcan School. Based in New York City between 1897 and 1917, the Ashcan School consisted of artists concerned with New York's street life who were critical observers of:

Immigration... the disparity between wealth and poverty, the city's ethnic populations and neighborhoods, and the changing relationship between men and women (Fishbein 13, 15).

Ashcan School artists hoped to depict

life realistically in order to underscore the often sad reality of the metropolitan lives they studied. Instead of employing a brightly colored palette and portraying aristocratic subjects, Ashcan artists preferred a dark, almost dirty palette of gray, dark blue, and black. Their subject matter was almost always urban; it depicted a grim New York with looming buildings, muddy streets, and congested alleyways. By so candidly depicting the urban class struggle, the Ashcan artists strove to awaken the upper classes from their moral somnolence, hoping that they would take action on behalf of their fellows.

One of the most suggestive works from this period is Henry J. Glintenkamp's 1911 piece *A Portrait of a Newsboy*. In this oil painting, Glintenkamp—who was affiliated with the Ashcan School—compassionately portrays the immense

hopelessness that defined the lives of the poor working class. Choosing an unattractive boy to represent the child labor force, Glintenkamp paints the boy's face with thick paint and harsh, broad strokes. The rough, delineated strokes scar the boy's face, suggesting physical and emotional abrasion. The newsboy's emotional distance and isolation is further enhanced by the strong black background that envelops and almost drowns him; as his coat merges seamlessly with his dark surroundings, the boy seems to succumb to the shadows. Glintenkamp borrows this technique (that of a portrait surrounded by darkness) from the Old Masters, most

notably Rembrandt (Graham 7). Whereas Old Master portraits employ the technique to illustrate the sitter's emergence from darkness into light, in this portrait, where the darkness overtakes the boy's clothes, we feel that the sitter has no independent existence outside of the blackness. In yet another distortion of the typical portrait, Glintenkamp places the boy in a three-quarter stance, usually associated with lending the sitter a social, dynamic personality (Barnet 37). Here, however, Glintenkamp refrains from providing the boy with a highly expressive personality. Refusing to look at either the viewer or the artist, the boy's downcast stare is vacuous and indifferent. The boy's thick, scarlet lips, ruddy cheeks, and red nose suggest that he has been out for many long hours in the cold. The darkness's vice-like grip is reinforced by the

Studying political art gives us the opportunity to explore the artists' moral dilemmas—which, in turn, solicit our own moral thoughtfulness as viewers.

compositional instability of the painting; forming a tenuous rhombus-shape, the part in the boy's hair is mirrored in his white, V-neck collar. Surrounded by the weight of the dark mass, we feel the rhombus may collapse at any moment, obliterating the boy. In the boy's face is captured a coarse despondence. The viewer sympathizes with the nameless newsboy who, in his socially forced anonymity, is trapped by futile circumstances.

By taking the city dweller out of the street and displaying him as art in a gallery, Glintenkamp seeks to promote

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social awareness, if not outright change. Far from portraying the naïve sparkle of other artists' child portraits of the time, Glintenkamp prefers to illustrate, with supreme bluntness, the painful reality of a youth crushed by hopelessness.

As modern viewers, we find that this portrait maintains its relevancy. Upon viewing the lonely child, we are jolted out of our own complacency: What ethical dilemmas does this portrait raise for us? What social injustices may we be over-

looking? What, as moral citizens, are our responsibilities in alleviating the plight of the disadvantaged? By acknowledging the purposefulness of political art and opening ourselves up to its lessons, we may learn about history, contemplate politics, and—perhaps most important—consider the ethics on which our own beliefs are founded. ❖

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. New York: Longman, 2000.

Fishbein, Leslie. "Introduction." *Art for the Masses by Rebecca Zurier*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Graham [Gallery]. *Henry Glintenkamp: Ash Can Years to Expressionism Painting and Drawings 1908–1939*. New York: Graham Gallery, 1981. Essay by Sandra Leff.

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ON THE HOMEFRONT *continued*

opportunity to view human nudity as natural, with dignity and respect.

The rest of the afternoon was an unparalleled experience which we both thoroughly enjoyed. At the Wyeth exhibit, we took headphones (a natural accessory for teenagers) and listened to an audio tour that explained the symbolism and background stories of the paintings. Many of the works feature timeworn, commonplace subjects imbued with serene beauty and emotion. We were struck by the artist's incredible attention to detail and the discipline required by his time-consuming technique. The cumulative impact makes viewers slow down, observe, and really appreciate our surroundings and the uniqueness of each human being.

Most importantly, the themes of the paintings prompted discussion about issues that parents and teenagers rarely mention: loss, death, and responsibility to one's family and community, among other things. For example, Andrew Wyeth's primary mentor was his father, famed illustrator N.C. Wyeth, who had

a profound influence on his art and life. Describing a painting—done after his father's death—of a lone figure in a canvas dominated by a large, desolate hill, Wyeth says that the hill itself is a portrait of his father. Only after his father was gone did he feel that he had become a true artist. We talked afterwards about the paradox of this comment, about love and grief, and about respect for one's parents and teachers versus the natural desire for independence.

In the museum café and all the way home, my son kept the iPod stowed as he pursued our conversation. We discussed the artist's lifetime devotion to his old friends, his modest and private lifestyle despite significant wealth and fame, and the extraordinary time he invested in perfecting each painting, some of which involved innumerable studies and revisions. My son raised interesting questions laden with ethical and legal issues: Why do patrons choose to become philanthropists, and why support the arts? Why is American and

European art so different from that of African, Asian, and Islamic societies, and which is "better"? What happens if art is stolen from individual owners, from museums, or from other countries?

The impact of our museum visit extended to realms that conventional education and planned curricula could not begin to reach. Museums, whether dealing with art, science or history, represent permanence and an appreciation for the enduring achievements of the past. These institutions and their collections are monuments to the generosity and visionary wisdom of the patrons. The most valuable part of the museum experience, however, is the chance to spend time with family members talking, learning, sharing ideas, and enjoying the work of some wise people who came before us. ❖

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The Moral Vision of van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*

By Robert Wauhkonen



Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885.

Before Vincent van Gogh devoted his life to painting, he spent several years preparing for the ministry. During the period in his life when he left his studies for the ministry to become an artist, he wrote a lengthy letter to his brother Theo explaining his decision to choose a new vocation. Much of the letter focuses on van Gogh's failure, at age twenty seven, to have settled upon a profession, a source of much anguish to himself and his family. The letter, in declaring this newly chosen direction, also sets forth van Gogh's belief in the moral and spiritual power of art:

But you see, there are many things which one must believe and love. There is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, and of Correggio in Michelet, and of Delacroix in Victor Hugo; and then there is something of Rembrandt in the Gospel, or something of the Gospel in Rembrandt... To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God; one man wrote it in a book; another, in a picture (van Gogh, 133).

The theologian Henri Nouwen

observes that this belief so powerfully defined van Gogh's view of art—and himself as an artist—that even as van Gogh left his studies for the ministry behind, he “remained a minister” (Edwards ix).

This view of art defines van Gogh's work from his first drawings and paintings to his final masterpieces. An early painting that powerfully expresses this vision is *The Potato Eaters*. Less well known than his later masterpieces such as *Starry Night*, *The Sower*, and many of his self-portraits, *The Potato Eaters* is a moving example of the genre common to the time called “peasant painting.” Its themes are the dignity of labor, specifically that of peasant farmers, and the sustaining power of love.

The subject matter [of van Gogh's The Potato Eaters] may be from another era, but the virtues it expresses resonate deeply today.

The painting depicts a poor mining family crowded around a small table in a dark room illuminated by an overhead lamp. Just before leaving his studies for the ministry, van Gogh had worked as a missionary in the Borinage, in Belgium, a poor mining community. The painting recalls scenes van Gogh knew well and described in letters from that period while he preached and lived among the mining families. The painting, with respect to both the subject depicted and the manner in which it is painted, is sober. The figures look preoccupied, caught up in their own thoughts about what is clearly a difficult life—that of

poor peasant farmers. The colors are murky and dark. But the soberness aside, there is an austere dignity—people facing life on their own terms, eating food they have grown themselves, sustained by each other's presence. The light from the lamp, glimmering like a star, pierces the gloom with the symbolic suggestiveness of the unifying power of love (Erickson 89).

That van Gogh hoped to evoke such sentiments is clear from his comments on the painting:

I have tried to emphasize that those people eating their potatoes in the lamplight have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor and how they have earned their food...Painting peas-

ant life is a serious thing, and I should reproach myself if I did not try to make pictures which will rouse serious thoughts in those who think seriously about art and life (van Gogh, 404).

Many nineteenth-century French painters, notably Millet, sought to embody the virtues of honest labor and a spiritual connection to the earth in their depiction of peasant farmers as both social and political statements. *The Potato Eaters* not only expresses van Gogh's great regard and respect for such workers, but a spiritualized heroism of

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the peasant laborer common during the period.

Van Gogh's expressive use of paint—which characterizes much of his work—is instrumental in conveying the painting's themes. The brush strokes are rough and turgid, the paint heavily built up in places. In the expressive brush strokes, art historian Judy Sund sees an attempt to evoke the coarseness of the peasants' actual existence (93). She notes how van Gogh, in a letter written about the time he painted *The Potato Eaters*, explained his intention of forsaking exactitude "in favor of sentiment and a truth to nature that was felt rather than optically precise" (van Gogh, 410). The colors themselves

evoke peasant life. Out of respect for a saying about Millet that "his peasants seem to be painted with the earth they sow" (van Gogh, 405), van Gogh repainted the figures with the "color of a very dusty potato, unpeeled of course" (van Gogh, 406). Sund believes that van Gogh was attempting to evoke synesthetically both the look and smell of peasant life in his choice of colors and heavy application of paint (94).

The Potato Eaters provides a moving example of a work of art with a strong moral vision by a universally admired artist. The subject matter may be from another era, but the virtues it expresses resonate deeply today. Regarding van Gogh's self-admonition to reproach

himself "should he fail to make pictures [that] raise serious thoughts in those who think seriously about art and life," with this painting—and so many others—van Gogh stands blameless. ❖

Edwards, Cliff. *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989.

Erickson, Kathleen Powers. *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent Van Gogh*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.

Sund, Judy. *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958.

Robert Wauhkonen is the Director of General Education Planning at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

QUOTES, BOOKS, and MOVIES

Quotes on Art

"A room hung with pictures is a room hung with thoughts."

—JOSHUA REYNOLDS

"Art is a human activity which has as its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen." —LEO TOLSTOY

"Art does not reproduce what is visible; it makes things visible." —PAUL KLEE

"Art is an effort to create, beside a real world, a more human world."

—ANDRE MAUROIS

"Art is the great democrat, calling forth creative genius from every sector of society, disregarding race or religion or wealth or color." —JOHN F. KENNEDY

"Art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it." —VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

Books on Art

Teaching Art with Books Kids Love: Teaching Art Appreciation, Elements of Art, and Principles of Design with Award-Winning Children's Books, Darcy Frohardt

The Kids' Multicultural Art Book: Art & Craft Experiences from Around the World, Alexandra M. Terzian

Off the Wall Museum Guides for Kids, Ruthie Knapp & Janice Lehmborg

Let's Meet Famous Artists!, Harriet Kinghorn

The Art of Teaching Art to Children: In School and at Home, Nancy Beal

Films Exploring Ethical Dilemmas

All the President's Men (Warner Home Video, 2006)

An Inconvenient Truth (Lawrence Bender Productions, 2006)

The Children of Heaven (Miramax Studios, 1999)

The Corporation (Zeitgeist Films, 2005)

Groundhog Day (Sony Pictures, 1993)

High Noon (Republic Pictures, 1952)

Master and Commander (20th Century Fox, 2004)

Shattered Glass (Lions Gate, 2004)

Quiz Show (Walt Disney Video, 1999)

By Randy W. Granger

Ethics in Art Education

I believe that the paramount responsibility of a teacher of the visual arts is to constantly seek, honor, and draw forth the artist in every child. With this intention, the arts classroom becomes a place where character is built, where excellence is experienced, where the desire to produce what is useful to the community is cultivated, and where perseverance to accomplish what may be difficult is honed.

I believe that to predictably and reliably platform student success in any discipline, the teacher must first be trustworthy and inspirational, then continually reflective and highly sensitive to learners and to the process of learning. A teacher must also constantly draw upon his own—and his students'—creativity, imagination, resourcefulness, and connectivity in developing the structures and tools for student success. I believe that all people are capable of making informed aesthetic judgments and creating aesthetically sound works of art. Every student has the capacity to

highly visible way, the classroom can reveal a comprehensive system of organization and structure for promoting student achievement in a wide variety of artistic areas. I recommend not having a “teacher zone,” and constantly reconfiguring the room to reflect the student activities of the day. Having dedicated student work zones around the perimeter of the room invites students to enter the room and immediately engage in their work, developing their initiative and “can-do” spirit. The arts classroom is a potential home to “forward-looking learning” (learning that is focused on finding solutions that do not already exist), where students, teachers, and parents work in partnership to develop skills, attitudes, and sensibilities with optimism and respect for others. In this environment, students take risks to successfully solve problems. They value what the arts teach them about their own imaginations, possibilities, and selves.

I use curricula grounded in the *design for thinking* process that we

across disciplines. It ensures cognition (metacognition, higher-order thinking) and collaboration through seven domains of design activity, thereby empowering students to achieve a higher degree of success with greater predictability and to experience excellence through their own creative vision. The use of this model is especially suited to learning environments where forward-looking learning is the educational goal. The model teaches students to communicate with precision and clarity, both visually and in spoken and written language.

Students engaged in learning that has a real-world component experience great excitement, enthusiasm, and seriousness of purpose that lead to passion for what “could be.” They appreciate how the arts can be a point of entry to any design destination. For example, I invite my students to focus on several assistive technology projects each year so that they acquire an understanding of service to others through the arts, as well as an understanding of how the arts can bring people together.

As an art teacher, I experience firsthand the deep sense of pride and accomplishment of my students when the products borne of their art experience have made a difference in other people's lives. This happens especially in areas where the *design for thinking* process is applied to find new assistive technology solutions. In a collaborative process using design as a bridge to art and science, students understand that art production can address real needs. Each project not only provides

When a teacher of the visual arts collaborates with student teams to solve real-world problems, the artist in every child... is drawn forth...

successfully engage the aesthetic learning process, given clear expectations and a collaborative structure for success guided by the teacher.

The art classroom can be designed as a haven for learning and a place where the artist in every person can be encouraged to come forth in an atmosphere of respect for the creative process. In a

developed at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. This innovative problem-solving model provides a philosophical foundation for teaching and learning and engages students in analyzing and understanding their thought processes as they invent solutions to life's challenges. This model provides a structure that helps students think broadly, analytically, and reflectively

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Ethics Lessons in Art and Film at the Kinkaid School

By Jim Dunaway

As the Dean of Faculty at the Kinkaid School in Houston, Texas, I teach a one-semester ethics course to juniors and seniors. Towards the end of the course, I show three films to my students, who would have received exposure to classical moral thinkers and theories earlier in the semester. The films provide vivid examples of moral depravity and moral courage; they keep students engaged and promote reflection.

The first film is *Weapons of the Spirit*, Pierre Sauvage's moving documentary of the French village, Le Chambon, where he and several thousand other Jews—most of them children—were sheltered from the Vichy government during World War II. We also read articles by Philip Hallie on Le Chambon and study the question of evil and the virtue of hospitality. During this time the students write a

short essay attempting to show connections between ethics and the behavior of the citizens of Le Chambon and those who would have deported these Jews to concentration and death camps.

The second film is Raoul Peck's *Sometimes in April*, a powerful drama of recent events in Rwanda. While this film covers some of the same ground as *Hotel Rwanda* (which could be used in its place), I find Peck's film more compelling and dramatic—it raises again questions concerning the perpetrator, victim, and bystander, as well as the effects of the Western nations' failure to intervene.

The final film is *Enron—The Smartest Guys in the Room*. Whatever one thinks of the guilt or innocence of figures such as Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, this fine documentary raises a variety of questions about how easily people are drawn down the road to

moral insensitivity and wrongdoing, no matter what their original intentions.

The final essay asks the students to use a variety of course materials—particularly material of the final weeks—to reflect upon the kind of people they want to be, both now and in the future. It asks them to balance the influence of classical ethical theories we have examined, the moral principles they brought to the course with them, important people and critical experiences that have shaped them, and the role of sentiment in determining the kind of human beings they want to be. It assumes that this is a progress report along the way, not the final report on their lives, and it asks students to think about their moral strengths and challenges. ❖

Jim Dunaway is the Dean of Faculty at the Kinkaid School in Houston, Texas.

By Mike Pardee

In a three-week Interim Term high school course called "Moments of Truth: Character, Choice, and Destiny in History, Fiction, and Film," I emphasize the archetypal aspects of certain moments of truth. Abraham's biblical binding of Isaac, for example, is an archetypal moment of truth. Should Abraham sacrifice his own flesh and blood in deference to a divine imperative or higher ideals, and can this

episode serve as a metaphor for intergenerational conflict of other sorts?

Wilfred Owen's poem, *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, links Isaac's binding to World War I, for instance. George Segal's sculpture *Abraham and Isaac* (1978) applies the binding's archetypal elements to the Vietnam War and the student victims at Kent State. Segal's memorial evokes the ways Abraham's dilemma parallels that of the older gen-

eration of politicians and generals who sacrificed younger American troops fighting communism in Southeast Asia in the '60s and '70s.

These same archetypal conflicts recur in the 2001 movie, *Behind Enemy Lines*. Admiral Leslie Reigart (played by Gene Hackman) feels an almost paternal commitment to his downed pilot, Chris Burnet (played by Owen Wilson), whom he often refers to as "my boy" or "son."

Loosely based on a real incident over Bosnia in 1995, *Behind Enemy Lines* examines Admiral Reigart's dilemma involving his loyalty to a higher cause or power (i.e., NATO and international peace) and the need to save one of his servicemen. On the one hand, Reigart is bound by the United States' allegiance to NATO, which opposes a U.S. military intervention to rescue the captive American in the Bosnian "No Fly Zone." NATO's commander, Admiral Piquet, orders Reigart not to rescue his soldier since it might exacerbate the conflict with Serbian forces and undermine multilateral peace in the region. On the other hand, the prospect of abandoning one of his own men is equally inconceiv-

able in light of Reigart's sense of ethical obligations and military code of honor.

Ultimately, Reigart's feeling of obligation to rescue his endangered pilot trumps his loyalty to NATO's Admiral Piquet. Unlike Abraham, who seems willing to follow God's instructions until the angel intervenes on Isaac's behalf, Admiral Reigart rejects the orders of a superior officer. As U.S. forces manage to save Burnet's life, their rescue efforts contravene NATO policy and theoretically endanger international peace. As a result of his insubordination of NATO and the United States military's chain of command, Admiral Reigart sacrifices his own career and is discharged. In sum, he pays a high personal and professional

price for his final decision.

Although the stories have disparate outcomes, juxtaposing them effectively illuminates archetypal elements of ethical dilemmas. What does it mean to sacrifice oneself or one's foremost interests in deference to some transcendent cause or higher calling? *Behind Enemy Lines* enables us to bring many of the issues raised by Abraham's binding of Isaac out of the most divinely religious realms and into a contemporary ethical context perhaps more familiar, resonant, and pertinent to my students. ❖

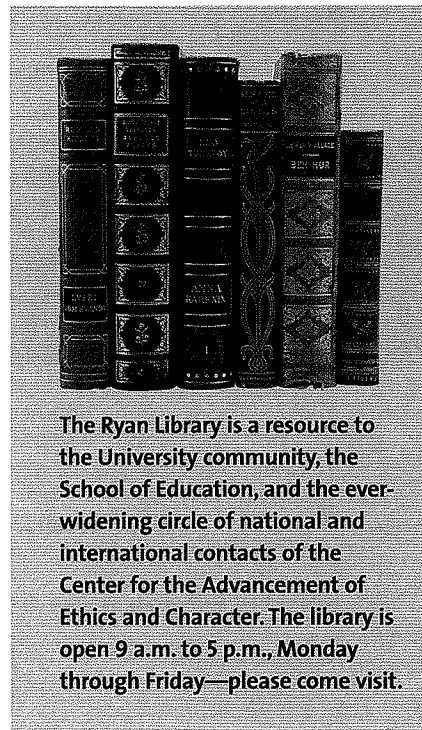
Mike Pardee is the Director of Character Education at the Kinaid School in Houston, Texas.

FROM THE TRENCHES *continued*

improved solutions for various underserved populations, but also has a profoundly life-transforming effect on me as a teacher and on my students as future citizens of the world. My classes have successfully designed and produced a variety of assistive solutions: pool walkers and beach walkers for children with cerebral palsy; safety storage solutions for walkers and wheelchairs on school buses; portable hand-wash units for a children's zoo; shower and pool wheelchairs for children; bus step appliances for school buses carrying children with ambulatory challenges; and a patented beach wheelchair that respects the dignity of the user. Each of these projects has confirmed the power of the arts to bring people together in service to others.

When a teacher of the visual arts collaborates with student teams to solve real-world problems, the artist in every child is engaged, inspired, and drawn forth in both mind and spirit. A safe, respectful arts classroom with a focus on producing what is useful builds character. It fosters perseverance to accomplish a goal that will serve humankind. What is initially perceived as difficult becomes an inspirational challenge to be met with collaborative creativity and optimism. There are no problems; there are only solutions waiting to be discovered by the imaginations of our students in a constructive, learning community. ❖

Randy Granger, a National Board Certified Teacher, teaches art to high school students at William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, PA.



The Ryan Library is a resource to the University community, the School of Education, and the ever-widening circle of national and international contacts of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character. The library is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday—please come visit.

UPCOMING EVENTS in CHARACTER EDUCATION

**OCTOBER 5, NOVEMBER 16, and
NOVEMBER 21, 2006**

Boston, MA

*Witnesses to the Holocaust
Speaker Series*

Contact: Center for the
Advancement of Ethics
and Character

Telephone: 617-353-3262

Website:

www.bu.edu/education/caec

*Join us at the CAEC's Ryan Library as
Dr. Micheline Federman (10/5), Dr.
Harold Bursztajn (11/16), and Dr.
Maurice Vanderpol (11/21), speak to
various forms of resistance during
the Holocaust.*

OCTOBER 26–28, 2006

Arlington, VA

*CEP's 13th National Forum:
From Positive Character
Development to Academic
Achievement*

Contact: Character Education
Partnership

Telephone: 800-988-8081

Website: www.character.org

FEBRUARY 28–MARCH 3, 2007

Denver, CO

*NAIS 2007 Annual Conference:
People, Planet, and Purpose*

Contact: National Association of
Independent Schools

Telephone: 202-973-9700

Website: www.nais.org

*On Saturday, March 3, from 9 a.m.
to 12 p.m., Dr. Bernice Lerner and
Dr. Karen Newman will give a
presentation on "Building Character
in the Independent School."*

MARCH 17–19, 2007

Anaheim, CA

*ASCD 2007 Annual Conference
and Exhibit Show: Valuing the
Whole Child*

Contact: Association for
Supervision and Curriculum
Development

Telephone: 800-933-2723

Website: www.ascd.org

SAVE THE DATE!

APRIL 12–13, 2007

Boston, MA

CAEC Spring Institute

The Ethic of Caring:

What Teachers Need to Know

Contact: Center for the
Advancement of Ethics
and Character

Telephone: 617-353-3262

Website:

www.bu.edu/education/caec

TO OUR READERS

We want to hear from you!

The strength of this newsletter depends on your active participation. Our readers want to learn what is happening in your school or community—that’s what our “From the Trenches” section is all about.

We welcome submissions of any kind, including letters, articles, and anecdotes. What has worked in your classroom, home, or school? What has inspired your dedication to character education? We also encourage recommendations for our Selected Bibliography, Movies, and Character Quotes.

Our next issue will spotlight “THE VIRTUE OF CARING.” The deadline for submissions is December 1, 2006. Please address all correspondence to: Newsletter Managing Editor, Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, 621 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215.

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