

# A Visit to the Museum - notes on Culture and Barbarism

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For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

- Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Clearly Walter Benjamin's statement about mankind's so-called cultural treasures corresponds to certain basic propositions of historical materialism. The whole emergence of 'civilization' was predicated on and associated with the division of society into classes i.e. on exploitation and oppression. In particular the development of 'culture' and 'the arts', whether we are speaking of philosophy, poetry, drama, architecture, sculpture or whatever required the existence of a social class freed from the drudgery of producing its own food and other basic material needs and thus able to devote large amounts of its time to learned pursuits and this in turn required that these basic activities be performed for them by others - slaves, servants and peasants.

Moreover, the maintenance of such a state of affairs was possible only with the development of a strong central authority standing above society and exercising a virtual monopoly of decisive physical force, i.e. a state, willing and able to act, when

required by the interests of the dominant class, with extreme barbarity.

However, speaking personally for a moment, it was the actual experience of visiting various museums and galleries that brought home to me just how direct and intimate has been the relationship between many of the highest achievements of human culture and the extremes of human barbarism.



Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

In the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, part of the Winter Palace of the Tsars, there hangs Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The central feature of this wonderful painting is the father placing his hands on the back of his kneeling son in a gesture of exceptional tenderness, love and acceptance. The picture was bought for the Hermitage in 1766 by the

Empress Catherine the Great who came to the throne by means of a coup against her husband Paul III in 1762 in which she had him murdered.

Remove your gaze from the painting and turn to the nearby gallery window. It looks out on the infamous Peter and Paul Fortress which stands directly on the other side of the Neva River. The Fortress was, of course, the legendary place of incarceration of political prisoners under Tsarism. In 1718 Peter the Great had his own son, Alexei, tortured to death there because of his involvement in a conspiracy.

In Venice there is the famous Bridge of Sighs which runs from the Doge's Palace to an adjacent building. The Doge's Palace is one of the main landmarks in Venice visited by millions annually. It contains work by Titian, Palladio, Tintoretto, Veronese, Tiepolo and many other masters. The Bridge of Sighs is also a famous sight beneath which pass gondolas.

But it was not from the romantic sighs of lovers that the Bridge got its name: rather it derives from the fact that the Bridge led directly from the court room in the Palace to the dungeons and torture chambers next door.



The Bridge of Sighs, Venice

Florence is the leading city of the early Renaissance and one of the most important centres of art in the world - the city of Giotto, Massaccio, Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, Leonardo and Michelangelo. It has two focal points: the extraordinarily beautiful Duomo (Cathedral), with its magnificent dome designed by Brunelleschi and its Campanile (bell tower) built by Giotto, and the Piazza della Signoria containing a replica of Michelangelo's *David*, Cellini's great *Perseus* and the magnificent Palazzo Vecchio.



Palazzo Vecchio in the Piazza della Signoria, Florence

In 1478 a long standing conflict between the Medici Family who ruled Florence at the time and their banker rivals, the Pazzi Family came to head. The Pazzis, in alliance with the Silviatis (papal bankers in Florence) and with the tacit support of Pope Sixtus IV, launched a coup. On Sunday 26 April during High Mass at the Duomo before a crowd of 10,000 they attacked Lorenzo and Giuliano de Medici. Giuliano was stabbed nine-

teen times and bled to death on the cathedral floor but Lorenzo, though wounded, escaped and rallied his supporters who counterattacked, capturing and killing the conspirators. One, Jacopo de Pazzi, was thrown from a window of the Palazzo, then dragged naked through the streets and thrown into the River Arno. Others were hung publicly from the walls of the Palace.

Twenty years later in 1498, the radical preacher, Girolamo Savonarola, who denounced the corruption of the church and was much admired by Botticelli and Michelangelo, was hung and burned at the stake in the Piazza della Signoria after being subject to torture by the strappado<sup>1</sup>.

This unity of opposites between culture and barbarism is nowhere as clear as in Rome. Rome of the High Renaissance and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel was also, of course, Rome of the Papacy (held at various times by the Borgias, the Medicis, the Della Roveres and the Farneses) which was legendary for its corruption, decadence and murderous intrigues and which together with the Jesuits and the Inquisition launched the Counter-Reformation at the Council of Trent in 1545. So the Rome of St. Peter's and the Vatican museums is also and simultaneously the Rome of brutal repression such as the public roasting in the Campo de' Fiori of Giordano Bruno, for the 'crime' of heresy.

But it is the ruins and art of Ancient Rome - the Colosseum, the Forum, the Capitoline Museums, the thermal baths of Caracalla - that most starkly embody the culture/barbarity relation. This is because they were and are so bound up with institution of slavery. The Colosseum, even its ruined state, is a building of awe-inspiring splendour but the purpose it served was unspeakable: the systematic slaughter of human beings and animals for 'sport'.

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<sup>1</sup>A gruesome mechanism that broke the shoulders.

Unfortunately the dependency of art on barbarism has not ended to this day although the links are more indirect and less overt. The New York Museum of Modern Art, generally regarded as the most influential museum in the history of modern art, was the creation of and run by the Rockefeller Family who amassed their vast fortunes through Standard Oil (forerunner of ExxonMobile); no reader of this Review should need reminding of the link between blood and oil. Another of America's leading art museums, The Getty in Los Angeles, is also based on oil money - in this case the fortune amassed by Jean Paul Getty via the Getty Oil Company. New York's second most important modern art museum is the Guggenheim, housed in a famous building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The Guggenheim differs from MOMA and the Getty in that it arose not from oil money but from gold mining in the Yukon.

In the UK the Tate Britain was built on the sight of the old Millbank Prison with money made by Henry Tate whose fortune derived from the sugar trade which had its roots in slavery in the Caribbean. By coincidence, if you look across the River Thames from the steps of the Tate what you see is Vauxhall Cross, the Ziggurat like headquarters of MI6.



Vauxhall Cross, London

And for most of the last 30 years the contemporary art scene in Britain has been dominated by Charles Saatchi who made his wealth through the Saatchi & Saatchi advertising agency which established itself by running Margaret Thatcher's election campaign in 1979. People who have worked for Saatchi testify not only to his ruthless capital accumulation but to his personal brutishness- a fact confirmed by his public assault on his wife, Nigella Lawson.

One of the largest collections of African art in the world is housed in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren in Belgium. How did that art get there? It is only necessary to pose the question to grasp the answer. It was hardly donated by the Congolese in gratitude for the kindness bestowed on them by King Leopold and his associates<sup>2</sup>.

These examples can be multiplied almost indefinitely because Marx's statement that 'the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class' applies with as much force to the area of the arts as it does to philosophy, law, religion or education; indeed even more so where painting, sculpture and architecture are concerned because the physical and monetary resources for the making, storage, display etc of such work are more than are needed to write a book or a poem. And because, to quote Marx again, 'If money comes into the world with a congenital bloodstain on one cheek, capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.'<sup>3</sup>

Therefore the question is what are the implications of this intimate association between culture and barbarous oppression? One view, much favoured by tyrants, rulers and their agents and apolo-

gists is that the cultural achievements justify or redeem the barbarism. This was concisely expressed by the deeply cynical Harry Lime in *The Third Man*.

Like the fella says, in Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.

An opposite, and in my view preferable, position is that no art, no matter how wonderful is worth a single human life. Then there is also the attitude, common in left wing and radical circles, that all art and culture of the past and all 'established' art of the present is so contaminated by and implicated in the barbarity and brutality of the ruling classes that it should be totally rejected in favour of a new 'people's' or working class art. This was the view taken, for example, by the Dadaists in Zurich in World War 1. It was the culture and art of the past, they argued, that had culminated in the mass slaughter in the trenches, which claimed 10 million lives or more, and therefore it deserved only to be dispensed with and destroyed. A similar position was taken by the Proletarian Culture movement (known as Proletcult) in Russia immediately after the 1917 Revolution; they rejected all 'bourgeois' art in the name of a new working class art that they believed they were in the process of creating.

Walter Benjamin himself, with whose observation this article began, stopped

<sup>2</sup>Belgian colonial rule in the Congo, especially under King Leopold, is legendary for its extreme brutality.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol I, London 1974, pp.711-12.

short of outright rejection but concluded that because the cultural treasures of the past 'have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror' the historical materialist 'views them with cautious detachment'.

However, the classical Marxists such as Marx and Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg took a rather less detached and rather more positive view of the great art of the past. They argued that this cultural heritage - despite its roots in slave, feudal and capitalist society - was something which the modern working class should not reject or destroy but should aim to take over from the bourgeoisie and make widely available to the masses. Marx, for example, is known to have been a great enthusiast for the literature of Ancient Greece, especially Aeschylus, and for Shakespeare. Engels particularly admired Balzac (despite his reactionary views) for his realistic depiction of French society. Lenin regarded the plans of the Proletkult as rather juvenile ultra-leftism and Trotsky variously defended Dante, Shakespeare and Pushkin on the grounds that reading their work, regardless of its overt political stance, would enrich the human personality and our understanding of life.

In support of this latter position, I would add that although humanity's 'cultural heritage' was, and remains, dominated and largely owned by the ruling classes and thus unavoidably associated with and tainted by their barbarism, the relationship between the art (and the artists) and the rulers is also marked by many contradictions.

For example, the Medici family, overall, dominated Florence during the Renaissance and after<sup>4</sup>, and also were patrons of the young Michelangelo. Nevertheless there was also resistance to Medici rule and Michelangelo's *David* was commissioned by the City Council to celebrate the success of the city in deposing them and it is clear that Michelangelo himself was hostile to the Medicis, just as he also had conflicts with Pope Julius II who commissioned the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Similarly, the Tsars may have bought up paintings by Rembrandt but Rembrandt himself, and his art, was a product of the Dutch Revolution which was broadly anti-imperial and progressive in character.<sup>5</sup> And the Rockefeller family's MOMA in New York may have promoted Picasso but Picasso was a leftist and, for a time, a Communist. Even when the artists are not in anyway radical their work often embodies values that are far more humane than those of the ruthless tyrants and billionaire exploiters for whom they end up working.

It is class society, not the art itself, which makes artistic achievement rest on barbaric and exploitative foundations and while artists can and do struggle in various ways to free themselves from this dependence it is ultimately a contradiction that can be resolved only by ending class society.

After the Revolution I am sure we can find many positive uses for the awesome Colosseum including housing an exhibition devoted to Spartacus and the great slave revolts.

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<sup>4</sup>For a period the Medicis were driven out of Florence but in the period of reaction after 1527 they returned as hereditary rulers - a position they retained for 200 years.

<sup>5</sup>See John Molyneux, *Rembrandt and Revolution*, Redwords, London 2001.