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INTRODUCTION

HUMAN RIGHTS/HUMAN WRONGS:

Museums and Their Objects

ROBERT HOBBS

Although museum staff members and the general public often accept the conventions of exhibiting art and producing catalogues as norms which are beyond question, I believe these conventions need to be challenged. I wish to begin this book by questioning assumptions about the inherent goodness of art, the great benefits to be derived from going to museums, the satisfying knowledge currently available about art, and the separation of art from the power struggles that seem to pervade all other aspects of life. Rather than providing answers, this introduction will suggest ways that certain beliefs can and should be questioned.

Museums and their publications often constitute a way of looking that is superimposed upon the visions of an individual artist to become the societal work of art that we call culture. If we are to free art from the current mode of museum practice—which seems intent on embalming it in a mausoleum—and allow it to be a deeply felt reaction to the world by a sensitive individual, then we have to look critically at museums and assess their attitudes about the role of art in contemporary life.

THE MUSEUM AS MAUSOLEUM

Largely a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century creation, the art museum has been viewed as an arbiter of taste, a legitimizer of vanguard experiments, and a repository for art where one can go and look and be suspended in time. Many art museums cultivate the feeling of a world outside time by mixing works of different periods and by emphasizing the universal appeal of art's formal qualities. To enter

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the hallowed marble halls of some institutions, or the pure white spaces of others, is to be removed from the mundane and situated in a rarefied atmosphere conducive to meditation. The idea is a brilliant one, but unfortunately it is an approach geared to look at all art as sensuous surface and design, and not to see that art is historical as well.

Many artists have remarked on the problems of this approach, which makes art precious and prevents it from functioning as a historical indicator of a particular time, place, and sensibility. In *News from Nowhere*, the nineteenth-century Utopian William Morris described the British Museum as irrelevant to the future, when people would wear their art and live with it daily in the form of beautiful and significant tools and furniture. In the twentieth century, Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp suggested that museums were the repositories for objects that had ceased to be art. He stated that an art object has a life span of approximately forty years (a little over a generation), during which time it is the subject of discussion and inquiry. After that time, its content ceases to be controversial and significant, and it comes to be prized primarily for its formal qualities. More recently, in a note titled "Some Void Thoughts on Museums," the sculptor Robert Smithson wrote:

Visiting a museum is a matter of going from void to void. Hallways lead the viewer to things once called "pictures" and "statues." Anachronisms hang and protrude from every angle. Themes without meaning press on the eye. Multifarious nothings permute into false windows (frames) that open up onto a verity of blanks. Stale images cancel one's perception and deviate one's motivation. Blind and senseless, one continues wandering around the remains of Europe, only to end in that massive deception "the art history of the recent past." Brain drain leads to eye drain, as one's sight defines emptiness by blankness. Sightings fall like heavy objects from one's eyes. Sight becomes devoid of sense, or the sight is there, but the sense is unavailable. Many try to hide this perceptual falling out by calling it abstract. Abstraction is everybody's zero but nobody's nought. Museums are tombs, and it looks like everything is turning into a museum. ("Some Void Thoughts on Museums," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt [New York: New York University Press, 1979], 58.)

When a museum sanctions vanguard work, Smithson implies, it removes the art from its original context and universalizes it as significant form. The museum is therefore a void because it eliminates discussion about art by making it absolute. Using many display techniques common to Tiffany's window dressers, museum staff members have a tendency to turn works of art into products.

At the University of Iowa Museum of Art, we hope to challenge some museum assumptions about the rarefied nature of art. This exhibition and catalogue represent a university-wide search for ways to approach art so that it remains a piece of history, so that other orientations besides the formalist approach prevail, and so that art will serve as the basis for discussion and thought.

THE MUSEUM'S CONTROL: THE CULTURAL LINE-UP

Our culture is so used to seeing art as a positive creative outlet, and museums as essential ingredients of culture, that we forget that modern museums originated in the eighteenth century, when such institutions as asylums, hospitals, and prisons were being formed on the theory of control through constantly exposing the insane, the ill, and the criminal elements to supervising eyes. Although French critic Michel Foucault has not written about museums as such, his analyses of asylums and prisons in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* and *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* provide a new means for comprehending the significance of the origins of museums in the eighteenth century. Foucault is concerned with the ways that power operates in a given society. Instead of regarding power as the prerogative of an individual ruler, Foucault suggests that in the modern world it operates through specific systems. Exemplary models of the power base created by systems include prisons and asylums, which in the eighteenth century used visibility as a means of control. If criminals and the insane could be watched, then their actions might provide clues to understanding their deviancy and ultimately suggest methods for reforming them.

Emphasizing visibility as rationality put into practice, Foucault provides concepts useful for understanding how museums serve to extend the power base of a society by controlling its creative sector. If the art of a people can be gathered together and lined up in galleries, just as criminals and the insane were lined up, it can be periodically reviewed the way a general reviews his troops, and order and reason can be maintained. Such an approach is particularly important in controlling any recently produced art because it allows people to see what deviations from the norm are being created and how the norm itself is becoming changed over time.

Individual works of art have always wielded power. But before the establishment of museums, and before art was assembled in a line-up

according to style, art's illusion seemed more mysterious and remarkable. Before museums, people could not readily compare works, study compositional devices, and review individual developments; they had to respond to the art images in front of them and to the feelings these images evoked. From their beginning, museums functioned like the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, which leveled the distinctions between different craft guilds and robbed craftspeople of both dignity and secrets by vesting authority in a written account of the trade rather than in the craftsperson.

Museums changed the concept of what art should be and promoted the assumption that only those objects that could be easily housed in galleries, such as prints, drawings, paintings, and sculpture, were art. Painting, the form most accommodating to the museum concept, came to be regarded as the most significant art. Over time museums have robbed art of much of its spiritual function by creating displays that encourage rapid consumption, and by de-emphasizing the miraculous feat of creating a believable illusion in a single object. Museums have developed during an era dominated by such historicist movements as Neoclassicism, Pre-Raphaelite art, the Gothic Revival, and primitivism, during an era when style seemed so easily assumable that an entire culture could try to clothe itself in the garments and manners of another time and place. The avant-garde came into being soon after museums went public and appears to have developed as a critique of the official art housed in museums. First the avant-garde served as a self-critical element of the art world; at the turn of the century it came to be an expected irritant; and in the late twentieth century it has become an established institution.

The term "art for art's sake" gained currency in France and England only fifty years after the first public museums were established in those countries. The concept of "art for art's sake" was first elaborated by Théophile Gautier in 1835 in his introduction to his novel *Made-moiselle de Maupin*, and it was soon adopted by artists who used it to promote what they thought were fundamental artistic freedoms. The freedom of "art for art's sake," of course, is severely limited because it separates art from life. What these artists regarded as freedom was, in actuality, a new way of exhibiting art, a new norm that stripped art of many of its mysteries and provided it with a public forum. Probably the first truly important museum-oriented artist was Edouard Manet, who created self-conscious works of art that alluded to known masterpieces in public collections. In works such as his *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, he played with common preconceptions about the propriety

of classical nudes and the impropriety of contemporary female nude models, even when they assumed the same postures as figures in well-known Renaissance paintings.

Although the University of Iowa Museum of Art has few works from the time when museums were first changing public attitudes toward art, the majority of its paintings reflect these changes. The Jawlensky *Spanierin* in the museum's collection [Fig. 1], for example, makes clear reference to the Spanish paintings of Manet. Jawlensky's is a cultivated and knowing art, a public discourse on art in the mod-



Figure 1.

ALEXEJ VON JAWLENSKY

Spanierin [Spanish woman], 1910.

Oil on canvas on board.

38¼ x 25½ in. (97.3 x 64.9 cm.).

University of Iowa Museum of Art.

Gift of Owen and Leone Elliott.

ern world as a closed system that signifies its own formal means—paint, color, and canvas—and its own conventions, in this case, equivalence between the idea of the exotic and the Spanish woman.

For better or worse, over the past two centuries the museum has become an institution that is destined to mirror itself. And the art that has been made since the origin of the museum concept also reflects the museum's role: lining up paintings and sculpture for systematic review. The museum levels distinctions so that art loses much of its power to communicate distinct new sensibilities. It tends to turn art into decontextualized masterworks that elicit awe and appreciation of universal qualities that are usually left undefined. Museums have turned art into objects, primarily into painted, printed, drawn, and

sculpted objects that are portable. The art that has been made for museums is an art subject to manipulation by being sequestered in store-rooms or by being exhibited as an example of a particular species. The museum work of art is in danger of becoming either a decoration or an isolated masterpiece that evokes aesthetic pleasure and speaks to universally relevant human values that have little to do with the problems of living in a specific time and place.

Even works not intended for the museum fall under its influence. African fetishes are exhibited as sculpture, North American Indian rattles become *objets d'art*; thus, sacred objects are secularized, and everyday objects such as ceramic bowls and silver cups are turned into merely beautiful forms. The meaning of the work of art as an integral symbol in a social network is lost, and the object becomes "Art" with a capital "A."

There are, of course, advantages as well as disadvantages to the museum line-up, for it does insure that works of art are preserved, studied, and exhibited with some regularity. Museums make works of art available to large numbers of people, and they provide people who are especially open to the language of these forms with an opportunity to understand the sensibilities of another place, another time, perhaps another individual, in a special way.

In coordinating the exhibition *Human Rights/Human Wrongs*, we are fully aware of the limitations of the museum setting and the profound influence it has had on the viewing of art. Museum buildings in themselves provide a form of social control over the creative human spirit by giving art a ponderous and official quality that may never have been intended. A sketch exhibited in a museum no longer can be considered casually. In a museum it becomes official, and it is usually backed up with solid masonry, theatrical lighting, and galleries so constructed as to muffle sounds.

Although the art of the museum becomes accepted art, it does not have to cease being provocative. If viewers wish to come to terms with the art in itself, they must understand how this institution has changed art. They must try to comprehend the ways our society tends to institutionalize and contain knowledge so that ambiguity is lessened, and freedom—another form of ambiguity—is curtailed.

ART'S POWER

Approximately two centuries after the establishment of museums, which have emphasized the formal properties of art at the expense of

its content, we are again coming to appreciate the power of art.

We need to set aside the notion that art is concerned only with decoration or with ineffable pleasures, with pure delectation of the senses, and with all those refinements that make it rarefied and separate from daily existence. And we need to focus on what art does: it establishes identity, whether that identity be personal, societal, or political, and it also endows groups with power. The Israelites of the Old Testament understood the power of art when they made the Ark of the Covenant into a symbol so forceful that only a few could come near it. And Solomon certainly comprehended the power of art to confer high status on Jerusalem when he lavished the riches of his burgeoning empire on the temple. Similarly Native North Americans knew the power of art when they carved effigies and put them in their sacred bundles; when they lost their bundles to others, they were demoralized and felt that they had lost their source of strength.

So important is the power of art that it is worth examining its premises more fully to see how specific styles of art have established identities for Iowa and New York.

When Grand Wood painted *American Gothic* in 1930, he established an identity for the Midwest and for Iowa. Fully aware of the impact of the Depression, Wood sought an image which would communicate the enduring strengths of the Midwest and at the same time poke fun at the Puritan work ethic and the rigor with which ascetic people approached life, leading them in the nineteenth century to use the Gothic church style for even their simple homes. Wood used Late Gothic painting of fifteenth-century Flanders as a basis for his art. By creating an interesting interplay of Gothic arches that encompasses the rickrack of the woman's apron, the farmer's overalls, his pointed head, and his pitchfork, Wood referred indirectly to the religious devotion that permeated the lives of the people he depicted. The success of his image can be measured by the parodies of it that recur with surprising regularity on the editorial pages of newspapers, on greeting cards, and even on calendars. His *American Gothic* has become a well-loved cliché of American life, and it has also become a way of instantly categorizing the Midwest and Iowa.

It is no accident that Grant Wood chose to immortalize the humble birthplace of Iowa-born President Hoover, who was still in office in the early years of the Depression. Both men believed in the truisms of their youth. Both were intent on ignoring the problems of the Great Depression. Just as Hoover refused to create large-scale relief programs for the masses of hungry, unemployed Americans because he

believed that a dole would rob them of their dignity, so Grant Wood refused to portray contemporary problems and instead created cartoon-like renditions of American clichés in *The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover* (the rise of a powerful man from a humble background) and in *Parson Weems' Fable* (the honesty of the first President). The problem with the approach of both Grant Wood and Herbert Hoover is that they believed humor could be an antidote for overwhelming problems. They trivialized present-day concerns and they appeared to the world to be unfeeling. Hoover misconstrued the Depression, seeing it as a psychological state rather than the economic calamity that it actually was. He told newsman Raymond Clapper in February 1931: "What the country needs is a good big laugh. There seems to be a condition of hysteria. If someone could get off a good joke every ten days, I think our troubles would be over."

Although *American Gothic* and *The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover* are important works of art, and Grant Wood was without question a brilliant artist, his work has come to be regarded as emblematic of the Midwest. The result is that many people have become distrustful of it; they regard both Wood and the region as the embodiment of an alien world view.

In the 1930s, when most Americans were confronted by the difficulties of the Depression, a number of wealthy New Yorkers were patronizing European contemporary art and at the same time supporting a grandiose concept of colonial America. It is highly ironic that the Rockefeller Foundation gave money for the establishment of Colonial Williamsburg on the eve of the Great Crash. Colonial Williamsburg represents an ostentatious, baroque phase of American art; it illustrates the taste of the Tories more than it does that of the colonists, and it clearly establishes a basis for believing the American colonies to be elegant, refined, and highly cultivated. It suggests that the colonists might give up their tea, but they would never relinquish their love of fine earthenware, opulent damasks, and polished mahogany.

About the same time the Rockefellers funded Colonial Williamsburg, they also helped to establish and support the Museum of Modern Art, which opened its doors in New York City during the fateful year 1929. The Rockefellers, along with a few other well-placed New Yorkers, embraced European modern art. They wished to free themselves from the hegemony of older moneyed collectors, such as J. Pierpoint Morgan, who built the Morgan Library to house old master drawings and manuscripts, the Mellons, who also collected old masters and who helped to fund the National Gallery of Art, and Henry

Clay Frick, who viewed the art of Whistler as the culmination of his superb collection of Renaissance bronzes, old master European paintings, and other treasures. The Rockefellers wished to patronize a different artistic trend, one which was mostly French and avant-garde. In the thirties they commissioned Matisse and Léger to decorate their apartment, and the ascendancy of their financial empire was heralded by the creation of that great Art Deco masterpiece, Rockefeller Center. They allied themselves with Europe, and in their commissioned art they made a clear-cut statement about their international allegiances. Interestingly, their patronage of contemporary art went far beyond that evident at the time in Europe, where avant-garde artists were greatly respected by only a small group of intellectuals.

In the 1930s the American art world became separated into several camps and polarized into two main groups: the international progressive group, representing the new money of the Rockefellers, and the conservative Midwestern Regionalists, who rejected modernism and attempted with the grace of folk humor to reinvigorate the art of the old masters. Although Grant Wood may not have been consciously aware of his role in this power play between the isolationists and the internationalists, he certainly benefited from the almost overnight exposure his art received.

The practice of using art as a means for establishing power has continued in the second half of the twentieth century. Soon after World War II the U.S. government sent to Europe an exhibition of work by a small group of New Yorkers known as the Abstract Expressionists. Most members of this loosely formed group, which included Jackson Pollock, were considered politically suspect during the years of the McCarthy trials; they were known disdainfully as "Greenwich Village liberals" because they had sympathized with the Communists in the 1930s. Their art was perfect, however, for sending on international tours because it demonstrated to the world that even dissenting individual opinions were respected in the United States.

Grant Wood's Regionalism was not revived, even though some of its conservative ideas were continued by Andrew Wyeth. In the late 1940s and 1950s Wyeth became the spokesperson for a postwar generation that wanted to return home to live comfortably in ranch-style homes filled with solid rock maple furniture. And Wyeth has continued to find favor because he has been able to suggest nostalgia without giving in to it. His most famous work, *Christina's World*, pictures a crippled New Englander who is crawling toward her ancestral home.

The old homeplace is in shambles, indicating symbolically a sense of hopelessness in the American attempt to return home.

In postwar America, internationalism won out over regionalism, and New York has since become the artistic as well as the financial capital of the world. The combination of art and power is not a coincidence but a recurring phenomenon. It happened in Athens in the fifth century B.C.; it occurred again in fifteenth-century Florence and in sixteenth-century Rome, when Pope Julius II used Raphael and Michelangelo to aggrandize the papacy, provide Rome with a new point of view, and make the Vatican a center for international political intrigue. During the Counter Reformation, when Rome attempted to fight the Protestants, several popes found the Baroque style of the devout sculptor Bernini a perfect form of propaganda. In France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Louis XIV, the Sun King, used art to limit the power of the nobles. He built the stolid, Neoclassical Versailles and made of himself a significant work of art that had to be courted, dressed, and honored. He later helped to stimulate the seemingly benign, frivolous style of art and life known as Rococo, which to his great political advantage kept his nobles entertained in enormously expensive but harmless diversions while he and his cardinals ran the country. One has only to compare the light-hearted work of the mid-eighteenth-century Rococo artist Boucher, who created for the nobility, with the painstaking realism of Chardin, who made works for the small middle class, to understand how effective a political tool frivolity was in controlling the court by keeping it immersed in an unreal world.

Although no one fully understands why art has so much power, everyone knows that cities in the world become great because of their cultural resources, and that a style of art can confer enormous power upon a group. Probably this power goes far back in the memory of humankind to a time when art was magic, and an image of an animal on a cave wall appeared to be the animal itself, when the creator of that image possessed it and symbolically killed it before going out on a hunt. Dictators frequently overthrow the art of a former regime and then commission artists to create a style for them. Napoleon had his Jacques Louis David; Hitler his Albert Speer; and Mao Tse Tung the Cultural Revolution. All felt the need to impose an art, a style, and a way of living upon their subjects. They used art as an ultimate form of propaganda because art manifests a system of beliefs and values only hinted at by advertising. As symbols, works of art communicate both consciously and unconsciously. Instead of imitating life, art directs it.

Art provides us with models, with attitudes and, most important, with distinct sensibilities that become new ways of seeing, touching, hearing, and even smelling and tasting the world around us. Art instills in us a unique vision and new possibilities. It provides us with believable and intriguing identities.

MUSEUMS, ART, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Museums are usually described as being engaged in collecting, preserving, and interpreting works of art. The responsibilities of “collecting,” “preserving,” and “interpreting” are now so self-evident as to seem almost unimportant. Of course, museums are involved in finding works of art, keeping them in good condition, and making certain that the humidity and temperature control is constant, that people don’t touch the art, and that it is cared for by conservators. Catalogues about particular collections or exhibitions are published periodically, and the museum education department organizes special tours and slide programs that focus on the collection. These activities are so firmly ingrained in the concept of a museum that few of us ever stop to think about what a museum really is and how it helps establish a cultural identity.

In the United States we have had continuing education in cultural identity since the nineteenth century, when Thomas Cole reflected in his art and writings on the beauties and the passing of the American wilderness, and when the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 served to revive interest in our colonial cultural heritage. In the twentieth century our identity has been secured by the Williamsburg restoration, by Time-Life books focusing on the innovations of “this fabulous century” of ours, by American Heritage books, by Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation*, and even by films like *Sunset Boulevard*, which give us a feeling of the recent past and the passing of time. Our music also fortifies us with a security about our world. Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, the Talking Heads, and Tina Turner all give us confidence in ourselves. No matter where we are in the world, we feel at home when we turn on the radio because the music is often our own.

In a more subtle and less direct manner, works of art in museums reinforce our identity as citizens of a particular place and time. George Rickey’s sculpture *Four Rectangles Oblique, Variation II* [Fig. 2], which stands outside the University of Iowa Museum of Art, can be used as an example. We might examine briefly the values this sculpture assumes and attempts to reinforce in us. We don’t even have to

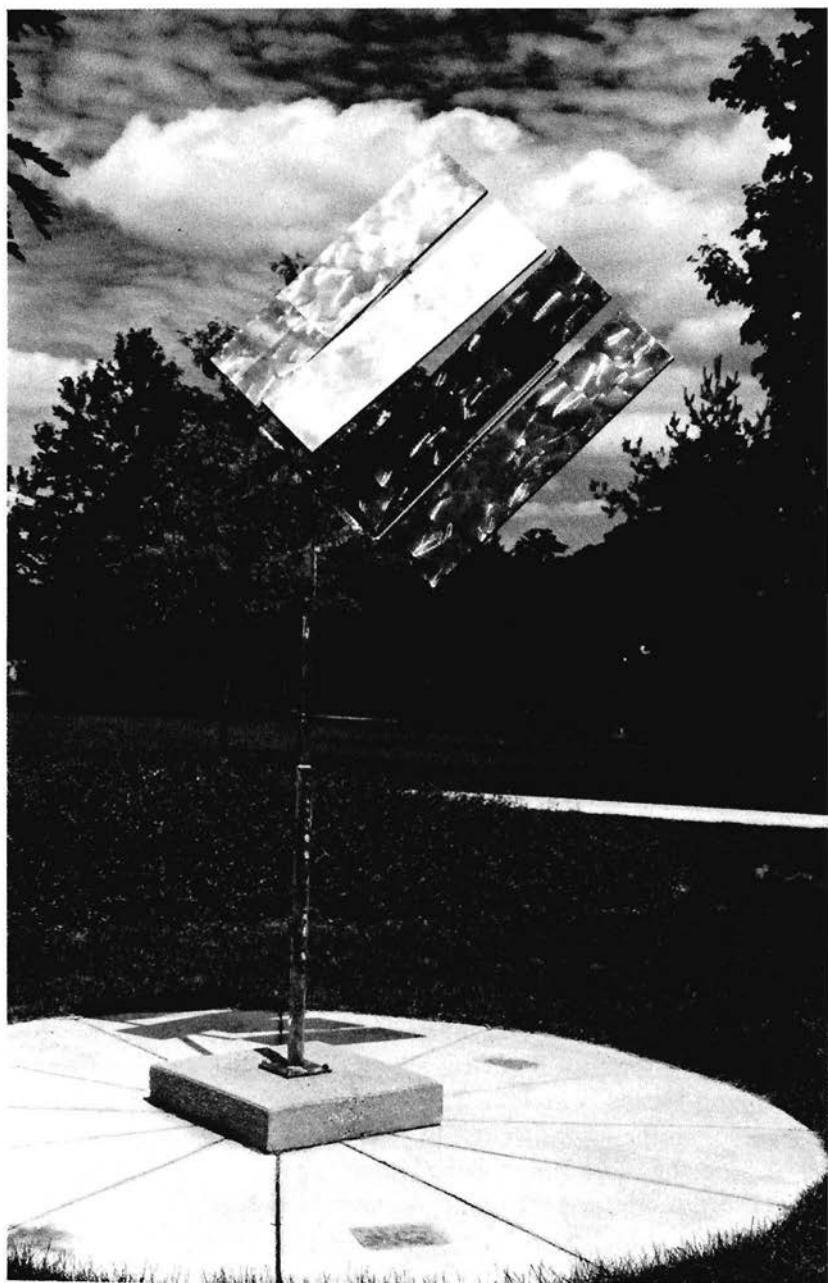


Figure 2. GEORGE RICKEY. *Four Rectangles Oblique, Variation II*, 1972–75. Stainless steel. 99 x 108 in. (251.4 x 274.3 cm.). University of Iowa Museum of Art. *Museum purchase.*

become acquainted with Rickey's personality, with his likes and dislikes, in order to understand some profound aspects of this work.

Probably the first aspect of this sculpture that one notices is that it is industrially fabricated. The sculpture looks like a machine; conceived in polished metal, it rotates with the wind, and in the process it shimmers in the sunlight and radiates a positive attitude toward modern technology. Because this technological sculpture does not manufacture any product and cannot be used to make anything, its function is obviously aesthetic. We do not have to concern ourselves with its possible obsolescence as a machine; all we have to do is enjoy it. We can relax as we examine it and simply savor the beauties of technology; we do not need to be threatened by the fact that machines might replace us on the job, separate us from the world, or overwhelm nature with a mechanized and polluted atmosphere. *Four Rectangles Oblique* and the landscape in which it is located look compatible and suggest to us that a machine can be a work of art, that it can be the real fruit of the land, that perhaps we did not veer in a totally wrong direction when we chose to become a technological society and in the process polluted our waterways and strip-mined our land. Rickey presents us with the technological ideal, and his importance rests in his ability to make this ideal believable again after almost two centuries of industrialization and one-third of a century of high technology. If we can enjoy the work of Rickey, we might begin to look appreciatively at other accomplishments of technology such as power lines, electric circuits, television aerials, and computer chips. Rickey's sculpture thus comforts and perhaps soothes us; it helps us to look positively at high technology and to appreciate its beauties; it enables us to accept our role in the last quarter of the twentieth century; and it provides a way for us to identify ourselves positively in the present.

Museums are important and necessary to us because they enable us to look at art in neutral settings and accept ideas on the aesthetic level—that is, on the emotional and intellectual level. We can come to terms with the past through seeing, thinking, and feeling its glories, and we can also start dealing with the present when we pause to enjoy the technology of *Four Rectangles Oblique*. The art museum is not about decoration, mere objects, or facts; it is concerned with identity, with identities in the past and in the present, with confirming in us what is real. The best artists don't necessarily set out to create beautiful objects; they set out to confirm a specific feeling or hunch they might have about reality. Rickey has confirmed an optimistic point of view and therefore his work elicits a pleasurable response. The Ger-

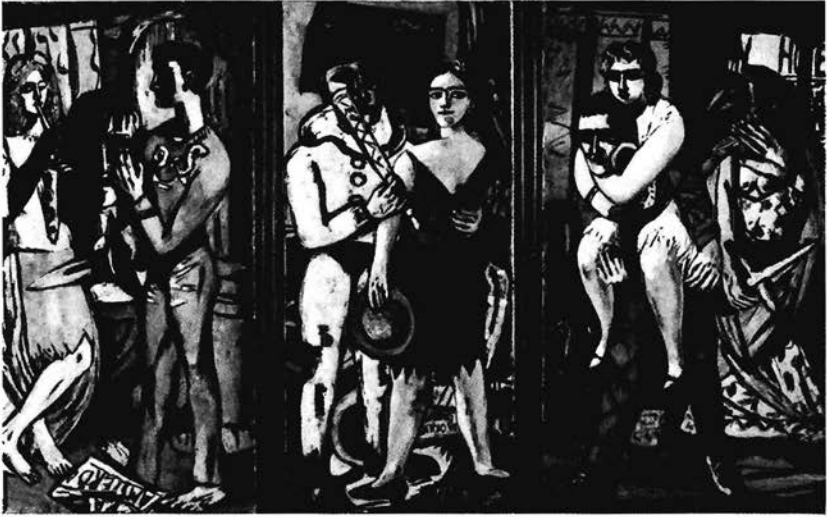


Figure 3: MAX BECKMANN. *Karneval*, 1943. Oil on canvas. Triptych: 75 x 116¼ in. (190.5 x 296.5 cm.). University of Iowa Museum of Art. Purchased through the aid of the Mark Ranney Memorial Fund.

man Expressionist Max Beckmann is not quite so optimistic in *Karneval* [Fig. 3], another work in this museum's collection. He presents us with an aspect of humanity that is unsettling, and his work may be less beautiful in the sense of being less pleasurable and harmonious, but it is no less real or significant.

A museum should deal with concepts of reality—and all the collecting, preserving, and interpreting that it does should in some way keep this goal in mind. Museums can help people to recognize through art who they are and what humans are capable of being. A museum can provide touchstones with reality; it can help people to achieve workable identities.

THE PURPOSE OF ART

Of what use is a work of art? If this question had been asked a few years ago, most people would have responded that a work of art is of little or no practical use. The correct answer, they then believed, is that a work of art is primarily aesthetic. They would have emphasized that art is unique and provides viewers with a special experience that they could feel but not really describe. If prodded further, they might

have spoken of art as a secular religion, as the essence of a feeling, as rarefied objects that could take them away from the mundane workaday world and give them a lift. If it had been pointed out that their "lift" was not exactly gratuitous but might be as practical and necessary as a cool drink or a comfortable chair, they would have insisted that art was special and different, not mundane, not repeatable, and not exactly inherent in the object, even though it depended on the object for its very existence.

This not-so-imaginary dialogue has a great deal to do with a desire to circumvent the materialism of the modern world while still affirming it. Art has been turned into the ultimate commodity that transcends the everyday at the same time that it hints at the spiritual. In other words, people have believed an abstract painting to be about shape, line, and color even though they thought it somehow something more than mere shape, line, and color. And painting has been regarded as only paint and canvas and also as more than its constituent materials; it is pure and universal and yet full of unassigned meanings.

If one asked the same question today, the response might well be different. Many people today would not think of discussing the gratuitous aspects of art. Instead, they would dwell on the context of art, that is, they would talk about the art's referents, its historical period, and its maker's political, religious, and social attitudes. They would regard art as an arrow that points away from itself and directs one to a specific time. To these respondents art is a function of all the non-art elements giving birth to it.

Obviously, both past and present responses to the question of art's function exhibit some difficulties. We use art as decoration, and yet we don't want to succumb to the purely decorative; we use art as a time machine to plunge us into another dimension, and yet we really don't want to accept the realities of another world. We do not ask enough of our art. We are still attempting to assume styles of the past and yet we don't really want to be tied to only one style: we wish to be universal. In the nineteenth century people developed a range of historical styles so that they could imaginatively live in Greece or Rome or the Middle Ages or the Renaissance—in any time but their own. In twentieth-century abstract art we have similarly attempted to circumvent both the mundaneness of day-to-day life and the upsetting changes that constantly besiege us by finding an imaginative realm in the unchanging and comforting materialism of such formal values as color, shape, and form.

Art can be merely decorative if we choose to minimize its quotient



Figure 4. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN. *Christ Preaching*, circa 1652. Etching with engraving and drypoint. 6⅞ x 8⅞ in. (15.6 x 20.7 cm.). University of Iowa Museum of Art. Gift of Owen and Leone Elliott.

of feeling and personally intuited truth and emphasize its form. But it can be a useful tool for coming to understand ourselves through careful inspection of how artists marshal their compositions, their figures, and their narrative devices to appeal to a specific type of viewer. In our society art continues to have the capacity to function; it still can cast us in a specific role that we must play if we are to understand it. The Jackson Pollock *Mural* in this museum surrounds us with dancing figures that are evocative, not clearly defined, and appeal as much to our subconscious as to our conscious mind, while the Rembrandt etchings in the Elliott Collection draw us into an intimate world and cause us to caress velvety inks with our eyes and reconstitute figures that are only summarily rendered. [Fig. 4] As we look, we turn white paper into light, and we empathize with those ideas that can best be communicated through the print medium and, by analogy, through the privacy of books. The Pollock painting is a private event made public. Created for the foyer of Peggy Guggenheim's townhouse in New York City, Pollock's *Mural* places an intuitive vision in a semi-public space. The Rembrandt etching inverts this approach, turning

religious scenes into private meditative experiences and making portraits—often a public form of art—private and revealing of thoughtful personalities.

Just as African masks serve the important functions of providing dead ancestors an entry into the world and manifesting earth spirits, so Western art serves the function of revealing aspects of our spiritual world to ourselves. Art is a mask which unveils reality; it is a conduit through which we can feel—if we're willing to take the chance—as someone else has felt. It's a mask that we wear when we wish truly to understand what it is like to see as another sees.

Although art is always enriching, it is not always uplifting. To see with the eyes of Pollock or Rembrandt is to see profoundly, but also to see at times negatively and despondently. Pollock manifested in his art many of the difficulties of his period, and Rembrandt certainly understood many of the problems of his own time. The beauty of their art is to be found in their acceptance of humanity and their refusal to gloss over what they perceived to be reality. The beauty of their art lies in the truth and perspicacity of their vision rather than in the richness of their colors and the harmony of their compositions. Their art functions as an emotional/intellectual barometer of their time; it is useful as an instrument of truth, and its beauty depends on its faithfulness to a specific vision. Beauty is not the goal of art: it is the captivating force that causes one to look; it entices one to understand and to come to terms with truth.

A WORD ABOUT THE PROJECT

The three works of art featured in *Human Rights/Human Wrongs: Art and Social Change* were selected because they span the twentieth century and provide three very different views of American culture. One of the three works is overtly political, but the other two works of art are not, and consequently they have served as excellent test cases for seeing how art in general relates to fundamental concerns and to broad-based political and social issues.

Lyonel Feininger's *In a Village Near Paris (Pink Sky)* (1909) represents the art of an American expatriate who became involved first with late Art Nouveau illustrations and political cartoons and later with the European avant-garde styles of Fauvism, Cubism, and German Expressionism. Jackson Pollock's *Mural* (1943) was created at a time when European avant-garde artists representing Surrealism, Cubism, Pur-

ism, and De Stijl were all gathered in New York because World War II had forced them to leave Europe. His painting reformulates several of these trends, particularly Surrealism, Cubism, and the all-over approach of the De Stijl painter Piet Mondrian, and provides the basis for the large-scale paintings that have come to be associated with the New York School. The ceramics of California artist Robert Arneson mark a dramatically new direction in American art, for they parody the seriousness of the New York School and embrace a new funk sensibility that joins lowbrow and highbrow elements and dares to be tasteless. In his recent political pieces inspired by his own bout with cancer and his concerns about an ultimate nuclear holocaust for all humankind, Arneson continues the process of debunking certain elevated art clichés such as Jackson Pollock's drips, which he used to cover one side of the face of his *Minuteman*. At the same time he elevates cartoons and graffiti, using tick-tack-toe configurations, scratched-out drawings of piled-up bodies, and words that become commands and wounds scarring the *Minuteman's* head, which closely resembles the heads Leonardo used for his *Battle of the Anghiari*.

In this project Fred Woodard and I were interested in the ways in which people from divergently different fields would look at works of art. This study provides an opportunity to see how non-art historians approach art and how a work of art can subtly change into a different work of art, depending on what questions are asked and what information is marshalled for an interpretation. Looking at a Feininger painting from the point of view of a journalist is very different from regarding it from the point of view of a specialist in German literature; similarly, approaching Pollock as a neurologist is very different from regarding him from the perspective of a poet.

Although the various approaches in this book represent the orientations of nine different disciplines, the works of art, to a certain extent, presuppose a certain kind of viewer—or, perhaps, a distinct sensibility that is a necessary prerequisite to their being understood. The Feininger demands a new understanding of highbrow and lowbrow culture in the forms of fine art and illustration. It also demands an acceptance of the painting as a highly artificial construct of abstract colors and shapes that distances viewers from the scene; it forces them to become alienated from the characters portrayed in the painting and to accept these figures as types rather than as the nineteenth-century individuals they first appear to be. Similarly, the Pollock mural plays on assumptions about the public and private nature of the self when it blows up to mural scale intimations of unconscious un-

derstandings. And the Arneson mixes up tragedy and graffiti to create a disturbing image of nuclear holocaust as one horribly tragic bad joke. Its mixture of horror and humor makes viewers uncomfortable because it provides them with contradictory scripts for reacting.

Each of these works presupposes a view of the world that is distinctly new, and these new world views, in my opinion, provide one of those remarkable ways through which art becomes a vehicle for social change. Rather than converting viewers through its subject matter, art makes new approaches to the world possible by indirectly choreographing its viewers so that they are forced to look from a new perspective. And it is from this new perspective, be it positive or negative, that art orients people to fundamental human concerns.

In this essay I have attempted to undermine the myth of pure vision by pointing out how museums alter seeing so that one looks at art through an institutional lens. The essays in this catalogue demonstrate that one sees art from distinct perspectives that depend on one's knowledge and field of expertise, as well as on the vantage point of the work of art in question.

To look at art is to think about an aspect of the world from a special point of view. It is my hope that this book will encourage people to take more time looking at individual works of art and to use their own experiences and knowledge of the world in forming their own conclusions about its meaning.