

THE CULTURE OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS



CHANGE

By Barry Cassidy

While in Rome last week I had an opportunity to visit the Coliseum which was kind of an adventure to me. After standing in line for 45 minutes we got to see the artifacts and some of the narratives that went along with the impressive ruins. There was one part of the tour that stuck in my mind.

There were random statues and busts that were defaced through the theory of "Damnatio memoriae" which roughly translates to "commendation to oblivion". The Roman Senate voted on imposing this sentence which involved the "destruction and cancellation of every visible trace of the name and image of the condemned" as the translation of the practice noted.

I have to think about what is happening in America today. The latest attempt to rewrite history is a mural of George Washington. "The Life of Washington" was painted by Victor Arnautoff, a leftist mural painter in the San Francisco area during the Depression. The mural is a representation of President George Washington as a soldier, surveyor and statesman. The 1,600-square-foot mural depicts white pioneers standing over the body of a Native American and slaves while working at Washington's Mount Vernon estate in Virginia.

Portraying facts of U.S. history, that the textbooks had always sought to obscure, Arnautoff was the man ahead of his time. The McCarthy hearings featured testimony by Victor Arnautoff, then a profes-

sor at Stanford and avowed Communist, as he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

Today people are upset that it depicts the early life in a brand-new America. The mural related to the days of legal slavery and subjugation of Native Americans. It is not a pretty mural as it shows the pain and anguish of the time to minority populations. The mural was funded through one of the great social programs offered by Franklin Roosevelt. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) put many to work doing public improvements during the depression. Along with the Civil Conservation Corps, the National Labor Relations Act (which recognized unions' right to exist, organize, bargain, and strike) and the Social Security Act, I consider it a great leap forward for the average person in the United States.

People have painted response murals to make emphasizes to better times. Now it will not be painted over, but it will be hidden. I would think that it will remain in place because it is painted on a wall.

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It can't be carted away to the warehouse that has the Kate Smith Statue, maybe even Robert E. Lee Statue, because it is part of the building.

The argument that got the mural covered was that there was a minority woman who proved that the mural inflicted harm, claiming showing the images of subjugation traumatized her children. Perhaps that is correct, that the children should be shielded from the stark reality of early America. You hear so much about people saying they were not told the truth about the country. This mural seems like it should be something we keep.


I believe that it is symptomatic of a cultural change within the United States that emphasizes the individual at the exclusion of all other issues. If it is offensive to you, you want it changed to suit your outlook. It is now that way with gender. Gender has become a spectrum and now other issues have taken on a level of fluidity as they relate to the way things have happened in America up to this point.

Issues like taking down murals and statues in the ever-changing world of new pronouns seems now to apply to marginalization of the individuals. People may not actually be marginalized, but they could consider themselves mar-

ginalized based upon their perception of themselves. In other words, you only need to perceive injustice rather than experience it. There are greater goods, which in this case is a valuable piece of depression art, which at the time of creation made a lot of white people uncomfortable. Enough to get Arnautoff a trip to DC to see if he was American enough.

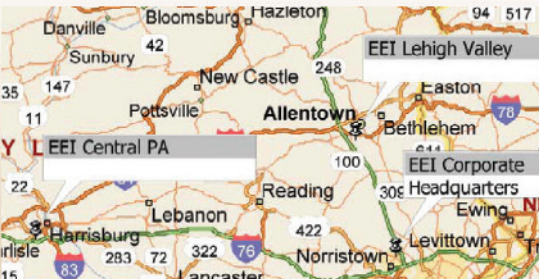
Then there is a song that Kate Smith sang that was considered satire which was also sung by the outspoken and left leaning Paul Robeson who, during the McCarthy era, ended up being black listed for his views. Some unknown people complained about the song. The people were not impacted directly by the song because as it is not a regular on any kind of music channel or radio station. It was that some people were impacted by the song because they perceived injustice, even if the song is satire.

This is a significant change in American culture that is happening. It features the will of the individual versus any aesthetic or symbolic considerations. This will significantly impact our perception of freedom as a country as well as a citizen living in the country. "Damnatio memoriae" is now about the ideas as well as people.



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