

Are artists heroes?
artists that defy
convention



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The Idea of Artist as Hero

They do not fight wars, end famine or rescue small children from burning buildings. Yet, at least according to some Renaissance-era boosters, they are heroes. Though they may not have led battalions, their accomplishments on the canvas were thought to be of such magnitude that, according to many, they deserved heroic praise and treatment. (Barolsky, 1998.) Two artists of their time who may deserve such accolades- emphasizing the qualifier- were Berthe Morisot and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Though their work did not necessarily put their lives and bodies in danger, they, and many contemporary impressionists were heroes for daring to defy convention.

Berthe Morisot was born into a wealthy French family where she was taught to appreciate art from an early age. However, this appreciation did not mean that she should have sought to make art her life's work and Morisot's decision to do so was surely a surprising one. Manet became one of her biggest influences both professionally and personally, so much so that he was eventually her brother in law. (Neary, 2005.)

Morisot was known for her " pictorial technique, with her loose brushstrokes, unfinished backgrounds, and light-infused color" (Author Unknown, 2005) which placed her squarely in the Impressionist camp, a school of thought she remained loyal to in her work long after the Impressionists disbanded and the movement died.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, a Morisot contemporary, was born in Lowell, Massachusetts and spent his childhood shuttled between America and Russia, which was where his father worked as a railroad engineer. Shortly

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after his father died, Whistler, then still a child, came back to America, settled in Connecticut and attended West Point. At the age of twenty, Whistler left America and never came back, preferring to work in Europe. However, Europeans themselves did not care for Whistler's output, considering it to be too abstract. Whistler in turn responded that the art favored by critics is too detailed, almost to the point of the canvas being stuffed with extras. (Author Unknown, 1998.)

What made Morisot and Whistler, whose only commonality seemed to be their artistic styles, deserving of being artistic heroes? Perhaps it was their will to define convention. This willingness cost them dearly. As Brown writes of Morisot, Whistler and their fellow impressionists, they " began to oppose the Academic standards that had dominated artistic production since the time of Louis XIV" and were consequently met with public " mockery and derision." (Brown, 2005.)

Whether in politics, religion, art or any other aspect of society, it is never an easy thing to defy convention. Indeed, Brown's article notes that towards the beginning of Hitler's reign, he organized the " degenerate art show" where the German public was invited to laugh at what was perceived by Nazis to be art that was beneath them. Two decades later, United States Senator Joseph McCarthy targeted visual artists in his hearings and three decades afterwards another United States Senator, Jesse Helms, insisted that the National Endowment for the Arts be disbanded. All three of the subjects mentioned above had plans that reached beyond artists- be it Hitler's Final Solution on McCarthy's hearings on supposed Communist sympathizers- or Helms' frequent attack on minorities and homosexuals. Yet in each of these

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cases, artists were the canaries in the coal mine- they were the first to wither attacks because they were perceived to be the easiest targets.

Before his death in 1903, Whistler produced over four hundred paintings, many of which are now exhibited in galleries and museums world-wide. (Author Unknown, 1998.) Yet, all this fame was garnered well after Whistler's demise. Even Leonardo Da Vinci, despite being well-respected even during his years on Earth, was mistrusted by certain British authorities- because he worked with his left hand. This struck many of the powers that be as ungodly and at one point Leonardo was tried as a sodomite. (Brown, 2005). Indeed, history is filled with figures who, despite having done good, often groundbreaking work, faced persecution- particularly in the Old World- [Galileo, Newton, even Einstein].

Lest one think that this is merely an exercise in Christianity-bashing or perhaps in decrying conventional Western civilization as we know it, it is important to note that early Christians themselves faced the wrath of others for being different. Tertullian, a figure of the Roman times, elucidated that "Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people." (Wade, 2002.)

Nor does this mean that anything which is new will inevitably shunned, with innovators put on the dock by the majority. A contemporary example involves the British Council, which recently reopened in Libya after a thirty year absence. (Black, 2007) However, people as a whole tend to operate within narrow confines, tend to lead safe lives and tend to dislike sudden

changes or challenges to the routine of life. It is this aversion to change that allows the ridicule and persecution of the different.

What, or who is a hero? Certainly those who fight fires, catch criminals, serve on the battlefield, or minister to the infirm in hospital wards count. But so too those men and women who create, inspire and persevere against the odds of their time.

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