

Mirror, Mirror

by Kathleen Smith

Art of every kind is like a mirror, reflecting the one who creates it. It is interesting to study the history of the arts for this reason, because we are able to look into that mirror, long after the creator of that image has gone to the grave. Through the amazing mirror of art we can look into the minds and souls of people like Michelangelo, Beethoven and Shakespeare though they have been dead for hundreds of years. What is most interesting to me, however, is making comparisons with the arts of today. If art is a reflection of a culture then ours is a most unique and desperate one!

Recently I saw an advertisement for a new exhibit at a famous New York museum. I browsed through some of the examples of the exhibit and was struck by the audacity of such work. Insanity was a word that came to mind where this work was concerned. However, it was highly praised and recommended as the best that the world has to offer. Nothing in the exhibit would have been difficult for anyone to have created, except perhaps emotionally. The work was crude representations of the most base, ugly and inhuman actions. But this is 'high art' today. Honestly, it made the strange works of Picasso look tame by comparison.

If this had been an isolated exhibit, or if this were only one artist in a million, it might be different. But that example is only one of millions like it. And in music the situation is just the same. The cutting edge of educated musicianship might be to take an expensive grand piano and push it off the stage in front of the audience. Again, the word 'insane' comes to mind. And is literature any different with it's killing fields and dystopian societies?

Science is more advanced than we have ever seen and society has never had so many mechanical marvels, yet never before have so many people been killed by man's inhumanity to man than in the last hundred years. Atomic weapons and germ warfare now make universal destruction practically a foregone conclusion. But most of us are not really in the loop for the high-brow art, music, literature and science. For most people, television and movies serve up the biggest portion of modern 'art'. Here again, one only needs to see a couple of current shows to get the picture of humanity today. Violence, promiscuity, insanity and over-the-top special effects are the hallmarks of this genre. If the art of a society is a reflection of that society then we are in big trouble.

But maybe it isn't as bad as all that. I think, perhaps, that many people have simply stopped producing their own art because Hollywood, television and the internet does it for them. I also think that Hollywood's 'art' reflects Hollywood. Yes, if we purchase it, watch it and condone it then we deserve what we get. But I don't think it has to end there. I think that we could and should produce our own works of art. Each community should encourage and foster such creation among it's own people. I think it should be broadcast among ourselves as well as exhibited and rewarded among ourselves. That kind of art would be a true reflection of who we are. I think it's time we took back the reins, artistically speaking, and let the New York museum take care of itself.

Greer Garson, a well-known actress from the mid twentieth century in a 1990 interview, speaking about the violence of many modern films said it best when she said, "I think the mirror should be tilted slightly upward when it's reflecting life -- toward the cheerful, the tender, the compassionate, the brave, the funny, the encouraging, all those things -- and not tilted down to the gutter part of the time, into the troubled vistas of conflict." We could do that, both individually and as a community. And if we don't, then we shouldn't be surprised if we start to believe the image we see in the mirror.