

7 July 2002

**The Public Square and the Culture of Amnesia**  
David J. Goa

an invited essay for  
*Findings*  
The Wilberforce Forum's Review of Contemporary Culture

### **The Public Square and the Culture of Amnesia**

Two encounters. It was the first week of Advent late in the afternoon of my first day in France. In the office of the Cultural Ministry blunt words broke an uneasy silence: “We have just finished with this cruel and sick part of our past and you have the audacity to try and bring it forward again. What do you think you are doing? Why would you want to do an exhibition on Jesus? It is passe, wrong and mischievous.” Tough but expected words. It was late in 1999 and my *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries* exhibition<sup>1</sup> for the year 2000 was in its final stage of gestation.

The second encounter took place twenty-four hours before the exhibition opened. We had just hung the Transfiguration of Christ by Girolamo Santacroce (fl. 1503-1536) in the section of the exhibition where I was exploring “Jesus, the Divine and Human Model.” It had arrived at the last minute in the hands of Roberto Fontanari, an art historian from the Galleria dell’Accademia (Venice) and Museo di San Marco (Florence). He was full of apology since, to his great embarrassment, the conservator preparing the painting for *Anno Domini* had cleaned a substantial portion of the dark patina off the Transfiguration revealing the footprint of Our Lord on the mountain and the figures in the foreground as patrons not disciples. We had an Ascension on our hands, not a Transfiguration. I was charmed by the story and the recognition, yet again, of how unstable even the simplest aspect of our knowledge often is even in the finest of museums. I suggested Roberto Fontanari have a look at the exhibition while we completed our work. When he found me again he expressed his astonishment at what he had just seen. He spoke of how, in Europe and in his own museum, curators shape the public’s pathways for exploring art work in ways devoid of the meaning central to the context in which the work was created: “I have thought privately about how we might explore the deeper questions of meaning that so much of our artistic work speaks to ... thought about it for twenty years. I have wanted to find a way to do this

but have never seen an exhibition in which this has been done until now. We always reduce the meaning of our works to aesthetics or history. We never get below either of them. But here you have found a third way. I am astonished and wish I had known what you were going to do so I could have opened our vaults for you.”

I was alert to the possibility that *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries* would be a scandal to the art critic and foolishness to the historian precisely because of its focus on meaning. Fontanari’s comment can as easily be said of North American museums and my encounter with the guardian of public culture in France occurred in one form or another in my own country, particularly in our most prestigious museums and galleries. But my orientation was not toward the art critic or historian. Teaching over the last decade at the University of Alberta and elsewhere I had become increasingly aware of the triumph of the hermeneutic of suspicion and the resulting spread of the culture of amnesia throughout so much of the generation of my children. A kind of cultural Alzheimer’s has eaten away at the cache of memory that has shaped and reshaped the life of Western civilization. The furnishings of the mind of each new class of freshman through the nineteen-eighties and nineties increasingly came to resemble the naked public square. In the early eighties there were a few students whose minds were furnished by the remnant of Western and Christian culture. By the nineties virtually all this cultural capital, its echo and polyphony, was banished from education; there were no furnishings present because they had never been taught. This condition has been noted with particular precision by a number of American cultural and religious critics known to the readers of this journal. Several Canadian philosophers have sounded a warning about this creeping disease for some time as well and it has occupied some of my thinking throughout my adult life.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, in classroom after classroom, as I sought to open up the sources of meaning and the play of ideas in the Biblical tradition and Christian culture I also witnessed the relief in students when they discover a world of meaning that illuminates both their experience and the culture in which we now live. It was largely with them in mind, the generation or two for whom “anno domini”<sup>3</sup> was at most an obscure Latin phrase, that I decided to do *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries*. Anthropologists have known for a hundred years although seldom drawn its implications, that the ultimate concern of virtually every human culture is to tell their children their story. Only in the modern West and particularly in France and North America was a decision made to censor the central cultural story, to banish it from public education and the formation of the young. In Western Canada where I live this occurred in the 1950s. With the growing pluralism of Canadian society it was thought only right to expunge from public education virtually any references to Christian culture including its contribution to the creation of the modern West. A public square free of Christian images and ideas was the pathway to tolerance and understanding in a pluralistic society. The argument for this systematic action buttressed the words spoken by my colleague in the French ministry and its implications for museums and galleries was at the heart of the diagnoses implied by my Italian colleague who’s office was next door to the extraordinary Cathedral of St. Mark on the piazza in Venice. With *Anno Domini* I set about to see if it was possible to touch and open the core story of Western civilization, the story of Jesus through centuries, and do so in a public museum, in the public square. Perhaps at the end of the millennium year when all the hoopla had worn thin the time might be ripe to glimpse again the pathways of meaning shaped by him who is “ever ancient, ever new.”

### **After the End of Art**

Occasionally over the last twenty years I have said to museum colleagues that if I found myself the director of a museum, a fate I have fortunately been spared, I would chisel over the lintel the words of the American poet e.e. cummings, “walking backwards into the future/walking forward into the past”. My interest is in nurturing a recovery of a sensibility that flourished prior to the fifteenth century and I have thought that the new ideology of Post-modernism might even provide a lever to open such an opportunity. It is on this ground that my work with *Anno Domini* meets an essential element in Arthur Danto’s argument in *After the End of Art*.<sup>4</sup> In a sense my work is bracketed by Danto’s work, which shows us the new possibilities that arrive with the collapse of Modernism, and by the work of his colleague and friend Hans Belting, which shows us what came before Modernism. Belting, who unveils the sensibilities prior to the fifteenth century, finishes his monumental study that maps the road to the modern period, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, with the final sentence “This stage completes the transformation of the holy image into a memory from olden times.”<sup>5</sup> Belting describes the transformation that took place within Western culture through which the image of the holy was finally colonized. The image of the holy came to be treated solely as a memory of the past; but it is also obvious to anyone who pays attention to Christian communities that holy image (in iconography, hymn and poetry, prayer and sermon) has never stopped doing its transformative work within the living tradition. Without challenging Belting I must point out that there is also a dimension of public culture to this matter of the continuity of Christian tradition. As Jaroslav Pelikan has so eloquently shown in the book that gave me the foundation for this exhibition, *Jesus Through the Centuries*<sup>6</sup>, the image of him who is “ever ancient, ever new” has continued to shaping and reshape ideas, relationships, institutions and sensibilities within societies that no longer speak his name.

Danto maps, within art history and philosophy, the collapse of Modernism and the filling of the breach by the post-modern condition that has captured so much of our public discourse. Over and over again he calls us to consider that “after the end of art...everything is possible.”<sup>7</sup> Scanning the lists of art exhibitions in museums and galleries over the last few decades one sees that clearly everything is possible, at least everything that reflects “the other” as public relations departments of these institutions proudly proclaim. But is it possible to walk backward into the future and forward into the past as Cummings proclaimed in his prophetic vision? To do so would surely mean, among other things, considering again the mother-load of artistic works within Western civilization: considering them from the perspective of meaning that was and is at play when they are understood within the Christian tradition, and considering the way in which they have been and continue to be at play within Western civilization. Has Post-modernism taken hold deeply enough in the minds and hearts of the guardians of our cultural institutions that indeed “everything is possible”? If so our institutions responsible for the care of memory and imagination, the care for education and understanding and thus for living tradition, will be open to the meaning central to Christian artistic expression over two thousand years. They will shirk their responsibility and miss an enormously important opportunity if they do not also admit a consideration of how Christian tradition continues, amidst the scrap heap of broken symbols and shattered myths of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, to shape so much of our art and ideas, our political, legal, social and cultural life. It seemed to me as I was conceiving of *Anno Domini* that the Christian tradition, its formative centrality and continuing significance for Western civilization, was again a legitimate consideration in the public square.

Two issues emerged quickly when I made my initial inquiries exploring the feasibility of an exhibition using artistic works, ancient, modern and contemporary, to explore the

meaning of Jesus, Jesus' teaching and what we have made of him over two thousand years. The first was expressed clearly by my French colleague. I came to see it as the disease of self-hatred initially expressed toward the Christian tradition but quickly expanding to include Western civilization and culture.<sup>8</sup> The second and equally as problematic given my intention to focus the *Anno Domini* exhibition on matters of meaning was the hegemony of aesthetics and history that dominates curatorial interpretation. In recent years curators and directors have clamored to get on the bandwagon and easily use the discourse of Post-modernism. When faced, however, with a straightforward thesis in which their artistic works would be in an exhibition shaped deliberately to open up the meaning and purpose at work in such artistic works within the framework of Christian culture and Western civilization they were hesitant or hostile. The identity of self-hatred seems to have found a codependent lover in the culture of reductionism to history and aesthetics. Together they have nurtured a generation or two in the curious amnesia of our time.

### **The Play of Meaning**

Towards the end of his exploration of what happens after the end of art Danto opens a discussion on "The Museum and the Public."<sup>9</sup> He grounds his argument in the encounter with art works that transcend the fashions of curators and art critics using three stories from art history to illustrate his point. The experience that Ruskin speaks about to his father, that James describes through Adam Verver, and that of Beuys in Edinburgh in 1970 teaches us about cultural formation and knowledge and about the gift of wonder that transforms our vision as well as our life. Danto points out that we need "to have some knowledge in order to have those experiences, and that is the kind of knowledge that has to be conveyed to people if they are to have those experiences." This prerequisite knowledge is

of a different order from what is usually taught as a kind of art appreciation rooted in historical school or aesthetic tradition, the common purview of the docent or art historian. And the experiences of wonder and transformation are also of a different order. Danto argues and I concur that these “experiences belong to philosophy and to religion, to the vehicles through which the meaning of life is transmitted to people in their dimension as human beings.... What they thirst for, in my view, what we all thirst for, is meaning: the kind of meaning that religion was capable of providing, or philosophy, or finally art – these being, in the tremendous vision of Hegel, the three (there are only three) moments of what he terms Absolute Spirit. I think it was the perception of artworks as fulcrums of meaning that inspired the templelike architectures of the great museums of James’s time, and it was their affinity with religion and philosophy that was sensed as conveying knowledge. That is, art was constructed as a fount rather than merely an object of knowledge.”

“Artworks are fulcrums of meaning.” They may move our understanding of the world in such a fundamental way that our vision, our way of seeing, is transformed. They are a “fount rather than merely an object of knowledge.” An encounter with artworks, ancient, modern and contemporary has the capacity to open the floodgates of meaning for a person, illuminate particular moments within the life of a community, and become a cache of meaning for a culture. Both as fulcrum and as fount artworks shatter the hegemony of aesthetics and history, and post-modern discourse finally recognizes this albeit in what I often consider to be a clumsy manner. While I had not read *After the End of Art* until after the work was done on *Anno Domini*, Danto provides a fulcrum for me to use to help move the focusing on meaning back onto the table in the boardrooms of museums and galleries. In this way these A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in 1995 are a gift to everyone in our



society who is interested in addressing the bareness of the public square and the amnesia of our time.

### **Cultural Exploration verses Evangelical Call**

In public museums in modern liberal democracies the age of pluralism and post-modern ideology provides an opportunity to explore various aspects of culture including the cultural patrimony of the Christian tradition. Modernism largely expunged any attempt to hold the past and present together through a consideration of tradition and human experience in favour of a new universalism mediated by a new priesthood of professionals, curators, critics and art historians. The universalism of Modernism was shattered by post-modern thinkers with the argument that all perspectives are equally acceptable because all are based on the particular ground on which particular human beings stand, each plot being privileged equally with each other plot. Many such thinkers go on to argue that given such hermetic isolation we have little possibility of reaching into each other's world of meaning. Each person lives and understandings life in an atomized way. I think Danto and I share a sense that this is most problematic and muddled aspect of Post-modern thought and needs to be taken on although that task is beyond the purview of this paper. The Post-modernist argument however, opens the door at least theoretically to all sorts of exhibitions grounded in particular worlds of meaning. The Modernist period colonized many galleries around their universal claim. It must surely have been one of the narrowest way of defining a universal in the history of culture and contained within itself, as Danto elegantly argues, the seeds of its own demise. Those who bemoan the loss of this overarching set of criteria and values are having a hard time making their case in the new discourse of museums throughout the Western world. The way is now clear to argue for exhibitions that recognize the

fulcrums of meaning and honour the subject, presence and purpose of artworks as founts of that meaning rather than mere examples of schools or periods in the history of art separated from the history of culture. In this new world that museums and galleries have entered, aspects of Christian self-understanding and Christian tradition are as legitimate as the self-understanding of any other particular group with its particular gospel. I was able in the context of *Anno Domini* to make the argument effectively enough to borrow artistic works from over thirty-five museums and galleries around the world.

But there is another dimension to this matter, that of the public character of cultural exploration of traditions. Christianity is understood as an evangelical faith whatever its significance may be for human culture and civilization. Within the Christian family there are Evangelicals who want the public discourse associated with the faith to be their discourse with their particular genius of understanding to be front and centre. Likewise among many of the cultural guardians of our public institutions there are professionals who reject any consideration of Christianity in the public square precisely because they also believe its significance is only and always as an evangelical (and virulent) faith

There were several lessons in *Anno Domini* on this matter. I have long argued that the cultural pluralism of modern North America opens wonderful opportunities for museums and makes remarkable demands on them as part of the public square. One of my guiding principles in selecting artistic works and in the shaping of the text and programming for the exhibition was that Christians from each of the major streams of this great tradition have the opportunity to encounter that which they claim and hold dear, “the love of one’s own”<sup>10</sup> if you will. I have little interest in glib ecumenism and see it as antithetical to an encounter with the deep world of meaning at the heart of the life of faith and its various paradigms. Instead of gathering people around what G.K. Chesterton, when speaking of

ecumenism called shared unbelief I was interested in seeing that each Christian would have an opportunity to be touched by the heart of their particular dimension of the faith. I was also cognizant that the confidence that comes from “the love of one’s own” is the ground from which to glimpse the other ways the presence of the Holy Spirit, as the most ancient Christian liturgies put it, is “everywhere present and fills all things.” I sought to be faithful to the Apostle Paul’s vocation to be “all things to all people” and, following his footsteps, did so at the heart of the meaning of the Gospel as it has unfolded over centuries and across cultures.

The enormous response of a great variety of Christians from churches including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, the churches of the Reformation and churches of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements bears witness to how this unfolded. Not only did they come as individuals and as church groups but they came again and brought their children to talk together about “the love of one’s own” as it was present in the public square. And because it was present they also reflected on “how large and significant the Galilean master has been over two thousand years.” That is how a teacher from a bible college of the Church of God put it when speaking of his own experience in *Anno Domini*. He spoke of his love and walk with Jesus and his denomination’s affection for their Saviour and friend. He then went on say how convicted he had become in the exhibition as he realized that, even in his mind, “Jesus was rather small compared to how large and significant the Galilean master has been over two thousand years.” There is a profound pluralism of experience and understanding within traditions and communities of faith. One does not honour it through the presumed safety of glib universals but by holding up the core of meaning as it has been at play in the mind and heart of the human family. Culture is a web of significance, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has made eminently clear. Museums and galleries and many of the guardians

of culture do not hesitate to honor this when they consider minorities, particularly if they are deemed victims. For public life to mature, and mature it must in a pluralistic society, for it to be properly furnished, it must also come to include the world of meaning, the fount of cultural sources, that have given us a civilization that made a public square possible in the first place.

---

1 I read Jaroslav Pelikan's *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* when it was published in 1985. In the mid 1990s the idea of doing a major exhibition for the eve of the third millennium of Christianity using Pelikan's thesis laid hold of my mind. I proposed the idea to Professor Pelikan and we met and discuss it at the Yale Club on one occasion when we were both in New York. The exhibition brought together some 325 artistic works spanning two millennium. It opened at the Provincial Museum of Alberta in October 2000 and ran to January 2001. The exhibition catalog was published under the title *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries*, David J. Goa, Linda Distad and Matthew Wangler with a Foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Edmonton, Alberta: The Provincial Museum of Alberta, 2000).

2 George Grant and Charles Taylor are the two who immediately come to mind.

3 When the Director of my museum and the Deputy Minister responsible for the government department in which the museum resides first saw the title of the exhibition, *Anno Domini*, they made a discreet phone call to inquire about its meaning. Both are trained scientists and children of the sixties.

4 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

5 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence, A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

6 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries, His Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985. Shortly after its publication this book took its place on the New York Times Bestsellers List for a time. It has been translated in numerous languages and continues to be available in several editions including an illustrated one.

8 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*. Translated by Leo S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

9 Danto, *Ibid*, 187-88.

10 The Canadian philosopher George Grant has written elegantly of this matter in many of his books.