

The MoMA and History

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am a member of the New York Museum of Modern Art. It is a cultural icon. I have always believed that public art galleries and museums ought to be neutral on matters of politics, even if individual artists obviously are not. Once upon a time museums and galleries in the free world showed art without political judgment. Their values were aesthetic, influenced by Greek philosophy and the pursuit of perfection. But then with the rise of both fascism and communism, art became a tool of propaganda.

On a visit last week to the MoMA, I was upset at how it has allowed politics to cloud its aesthetic judgment and betray its mission. First I saw a really impressive exhibition on the fourth level, of the multitalented American artist Robert Rauschenberg, which I heartily recommend. Then I went up a level to look at the display of modern art from the MoMA's own permanent collection.

I was immediately struck by something strange about the juxtaposition of art on display. It juxtaposed the greatest artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with some decidedly third-rate artwork. For example, there was a painting that would have embarrassed a second-year art school student of limited talent, by the Anglo-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid (known for her design rather than her art), next to a work by Picasso. At first I thought it was a mistake. But then I saw that it was intentional. They had put up work from very average artists from the Middle East in between those from the West. And under every one of them was a note saying:

"This work is by an artist from a nation which would be denied entry to the United States according to recent presidential executive orders. This is one of several such art works from the museum's collection installed throughout the fifth-floor galleries to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum as they are to the United States."

This refers to the so-called Trump Muslim ban, even if neither Egypt, Turkey, nor any of the four largest Muslim countries in the world, were included in the presidential order. Other museums, it seems, decided to remove artwork by all immigrants, as if the order had stopped all immigration into the USA.

The problem of course is not just whether museums should take political stands, important as that is. But to also define the parameters of legitimate and fair political debate. It is OK, according to the Whitney Gallery, to exhibit paintings of Israelis brutalizing Palestinians, but not acceptable to depict Palestinians murdering Israeli children. It is OK to condemn nationalists, but taboo to criticize Black Lives Matter.

The Iranian journalist Neda Amin, fled for her life from Iran for expressing

opposition to the government and claimed asylum in Turkey in 2014. She was tipped off that she was going to be arrested by Turkish authorities and extradited to Iran. The Israeli consulate in Istanbul granted her a special tourist visa to enter Israel and seek asylum. Will MoMA say anything about artists from countries that permanently refuse to allow Israelis to enter altogether? Perhaps they should intersperse Picasso with some Israeli painters and put a note underneath saying how they are banned from Muslim countries.

We are currently witnessing a very serious ideological battle in the so-called civilized world over truth and facts. People (and of course I include the media) will trumpet only the opinions that they agree with and tailor what is shown to the public to support their agenda.

Where does this all end? Shall we un-write the American constitution because it was written by slave owners, or dial back on American independence because the war against Britain was waged by slave owners as well? If so, we should ban Islam altogether, for it was for a thousand years the largest slave-trading culture in the world. Some think it still is.

Some argue that anyone who once owned slaves ought not to have a statue on public display. But isn't there a difference between those who fought for the South on purely political grounds and, like Robert E. Lee on being defeated, then turned to reconciliation and liberation? Surely a different case than those justices who supported the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision in favor of slavery.

I do indeed object when places like Ukraine erect statues commemorating Ukrainian heroes who happened to be mass murderers of Jews. I object to academics who praise Martin Heidegger and other Nazi supporters, even if they were brought to America and paid and praised for their contribution to rocket science. Most free societies are now comprised of citizens of conflicting narratives, religions, and cultures. Inevitably there will be differences. We should tolerate all who express different opinions (short of advocating violence and murder). But then how do we react when one culture's hero is another's criminal? Should one put up a statue or name a square to glorify a freedom fighter who will be also be regarded as a terrorist who murders in the pursuit of a cause? Nowadays the least historically minded can always turn to the internet to see an alternative narrative.

Should we remove Lincoln from his throne on public display in Washington and any public statues to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. If we are so easily offended, let us remove all Greek and Roman statues from public spaces, for they all approved of slavery. Most Christian monuments praise men who persecuted Jews or other Christians. If we are going to remove simply on the basis of cultural difference, we should remove all. Is there any politician who has ever been all good and not bad?

Kings and queens were once venerated. They combined state and religion. Statues were built. But then we learnt to take them out of politics. To make them symbolic. We no longer look to them to rule. History has moved on. Yet despite the Civil War in Britain there are statues to Cromwell as well as

King Charles.

It can be argued that statues should exist only in museums, where there is context and information, and not in public places where one cannot avoid the offense. Once statues were designed as objects of worship. Then as propaganda, to celebrate, to inform. Perhaps we should now abandon public statues as an archaic art form of communication. We know if we go to a Holocaust or slavery museum what the agenda will be. Let us not pretend there is such a thing as objectivity. The myth of one American nation is no longer sustainable.

We have reached this crisis because the fascists on the Left (of course, I do not suggest all left-wingers are fascists, any more than all right-wingers are Nazis) have been allowed to get away with physical violence on campuses in the USA, in Europe, and at the G20 conferences (remember Hamburg this year). Violence instead of argument. Left-wing and right-wing violence are just two sides of the same coin (as were Stalin and Hitler). We are seeing violence breed violence. The failure of governments and police forces to prevent violence only encourages more. Though police in Boston last week got it right! Keep them apart and give the fanatics on both sides no opportunity to fight.

We who abhor violence have to struggle all the more for intellectual honesty and objectivity. Mark Lilla, professor at Columbia University, has just published a book criticizing the liberal left for betraying its liberal values—*The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. For this, of course, he has been attacked by many on the academic left for betrayal and trolling. That's precisely how they always deal with views they don't like. Although Noam Chomsky has called the antics of the Antifa a major gift to the Right.

Lilla has encapsulated the prevailing attitude on campuses by saying that once it was: "I may disagree, but let's sit down and talk about it." Now it is: "I object to your views. They offend me and make me uncomfortable. I do not wish to discuss it. Get out!" Clearly, we cannot look to academia for truth. The Psalms were right when they said, "Truth springs from the ground upwards." Not the other way around.

One used to look to universities and institutions of culture like museums and galleries to be objective and balanced. To present information in an unbiased way, to allow the public to come to its own conclusions. No longer. They have now become tools of political correctness, name-calling, and pushing an agenda.

I am bitterly disappointed that MoMA has sunk to such petty political righteousness. I expected better. But it is a sign of the times. As a well known songster once sang: "We shall overcome."