

As learned commentators view  
in Homer more than  
Homer knew. Jonathan Swift

# Lancetteer













Founded in 2000

Ars est celare artem.  
Ovid

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## A debate about ethics and commercialism in the arts

By Alidè Kohlhaas

**W**hen an arts writer accuses an art gallery or museum of hucksterism it makes for sensational copy and attracts readers. Any writer, who takes this stance has to be careful that no hidden political agenda rests behind this accusation. Kate Taylor, a former theatre critic for the Globe and Mail, who now has been let loose on the readers of this newspaper to write about a whole lot of things she really doesn't know much about, is one of those writers with such an agenda. In an article in this newspaper dated Oct. 25, 2003, she opens her attack on the Degas exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) with this sentence: "The Degas show now stopping in Toronto exhibits hucksterism that can make an art lover increasingly cynical about the supposedly sacred place, the museum."

**W**ho has ever claimed that a gallery or museum is a sacred place? To apply such a term to a space where one goes to learn or to enjoy art and history is surely sacrilege. No museum is sacred, but is a public place for every kind of individual, whether in the mood to contemplate, to learn or to merely enjoy what is offered. If Taylor, who has often been caught knowing little about the theatre in her reviews, now feels she can speak about art than she may be the one who makes cynics out of her readers; cynics not about art, but about the state of what was once an honourable profession, journalism, but which is now falling more and more into the category of gossip.

**W**hile I am not 100 per cent enthusiastic about the Degas exhibit at the AGO, it has nothing to do with the gallery's showing bronzes cast after the death of Degas, but with a certain monotony that might have been avoided if there had been more colour added to the show. I see nothing wrong with a gallery or museum staging an exhibition to attract paying customers. Nor do I object to having to leave the display through a small gift shop that offers articles for sale related to Degas in one way or another. Why? I have long ago realized that we cannot expect the tax payer to pick up the tap for cultural events. Although I expect some participation of government in funding of places of cultural activity, I am of the school that feels that those who want to go to such places must be willing to contribute to their upkeep. We cannot expect members of the public, who are not interested in the arts, to pay our bills.

**T**aylor, and others like her, who have vigorously objected to both the Degas show here and in San Francisco, and in 2001 to the display of the Auguste

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Rodin plaster casts at the Royal Ontario Museum, are not really concerned with ethics. They are simply hiding behind this high-minded ethos. Be always wary of anyone who speaks of, ". . . unfortunately, it's all too common in the North American art world . . ." It is like that catch-all phrase, "western paternalism" used by those writing on feminist themes. Is there any society, east or west, that is not paternalistic? And, those who feel that North America (meaning often our southern neighbour) is guilty of commercialism in the arts, they really haven't kept up with what is happening on the other side of the pond. Every European country is cutting back on contributions to the arts because European coffers are empty.

**A**n anyone, who writes about the arts and makes strong statements, like Taylor and her colleagues, should read more about what is happening in the world, or should travel more and become involved not as tourists, but in the real lives of the citizens of non-North American countries. Britain, per capita, now gives less to the arts than Canada. France and Germany, to take two examples, are close to financial disaster, and are drastically cutting contributions to the arts.

**T**he days are gone when those who choose the arts as a way to make a living can expect that the ordinary citizens of their countries will pay their bills. Unemployment in France and Germany is phenomenally high. Growth is far below that here in Canada. Their national debts are growing while ours has been held in check.

**A**s wonderful as the arts are, and I have to admit, I cannot live without them, there are other things more important to everyday life. Health care, education, a good job, are the things that people want first and foremost. Journalists, who go about directly or indirectly demanding that governments give more to the arts are living in a world of unreality. That I have chosen to make my living by the word is my choice. That artists have made the choice to make a living by painting or sculpture is the choice of those individual. Neither I nor they can expect others to give us a free ride on the tax payer's back.

**Y**es, one applauds that finally we are getting an opera house here in Toronto. It is long overdue and it would not have been possible without some funding by the three levels of government. Yet, the real responsibility from now on lies on the backs of the users of that opera house, not on Joe Blow, who much rather goes to see a hockey game, and prefers Rita MacNeil to Jane Stilwell.

**O**ur arts in North America are vibrant because the individuals involved in the various fields of the arts are there because they are committed. In Europe, the arts have become stale because artists of every ilk have far too long been fed on the public trough and expect hand-outs.

**W**hen an art gallery or a museum brings a show that draws the public in greater than usual numbers it also at the same time beckons those visitors to go to the other displays housed in these centres of culture. One feeds the other. A block-buster show like the Art Deco exhibit at the ROM brings in people who normally might not go to a museum. Consequently, they will most likely discover that there are other treasures to be seen while at the museum, and so will come back. One has to catch one's fishes as best as one can. There is nothing wrong with well-organized commercialism if it serves a good purpose. European galleries have already discovered this. So,

please spare us all this accusatory tone about the North American art world's supposed short-comings.

**T**aylor's accusation that the AGO is not interested in educating the public should spend more time overseas. European centres of culture are often so elitist that the general public won't dare come near them. Do you really think that the average Viennese has ever been inside the Staatsoper? I know for sure that this is not the case. It is a tourist trap, a place for cultural snobs, and unsuspecting North Americans, who suffer from a cultural inferiority complex and are willing to pay exorbitant prices for often mediocre performances. Is there really one museum in continental Europe that is truly exciting to the average visitor? North American museums have managed far better to attract, and — entertain — those who enter their spaces.

**S**o, regardless of how pleased or not I personally may be with the Degas show at the AGO, I cannot fault the gallery for putting on the exhibit. I watched the public closely while there and discovered that there were many who were absolutely fascinated by what Degas tried to express with his three-dimensional art. It was a journey of discovery for them, and to have them denied that discovery would have been a far greater crime than what supposed purists deem ethically wrong.

**For review of the Degas exhibit at the AGO, click here** 

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