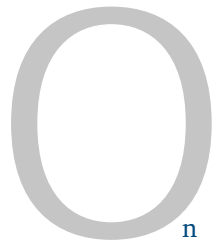




The Market & The Muse:

IF AN ARTIST PAINTS IN MONASTIC SECLUSION, IS IT ART?

BY CHRISTOPHER REARDON



20 n the outskirts of Milan, just seven miles from the dazzling fashion district where Gianni Versace and Miucci Prada launched their careers, a two-hundred-year-old manor house stands among several acres of barley, corn, and soy. The estate, a working farm and monastery, is home to a dozen Benedictine monks and, until recently, one artist in residence.

The artist, who died earlier this year at the age of eighty-six, was an American painter named William Congdon. Famous, then forgotten, he was the last surviving member of the New York School, the cluster of abstract expressionists who shook up the commercial art world in the late 1940s and 1950s. Apart from Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning, who died not long before him, Congdon didn't have much competition for the longevity title. After all, the New York School cemented its reputation for nihilism with the early, violent deaths of four of its members. Arshile Gorky hanged himself in 1948. Jackson Pollock wrapped his Oldsmobile around a tree in 1956. David Smith died in a car crash in 1965. And Mark Rothko put a razor blade to his wrists in 1970.

Congdon, who was born the night the *Titanic* sank, believed that he, too, was destined to go to an early grave. Certainly in the 1950s he kept on a collision course. In a letter from Guatemala City in 1957, he told his cousin, the poet Isabella Gardner, a descendant of the Boston collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, of the hazardous nature of his creative process. "In order to have a pure birth," he wrote, using a metaphor he often applied to his visceral style of action painting, "I must go through scenes little short of suicide and not a bit short of madness and destruction." No model of stability herself, Gardner saw his paintings (and her own writing) as the flowering of an otherwise noxious ancestral weed she called, in a poem so titled, "The Panic Vine." Ultimately, though, Congdon found a way to untangle himself both from the manic tendencies that were said to run through his family and from the self-annihilation that came to characterize the New York School. In August 1959, he went to Assisi, Italy, and converted to Roman Catholicism.

By then, some of his spirited cityscapes of New York and Venice, often rendered in thick strokes of black and gold, had already entered the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, as well as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. Congdon continued painting to the last days of his life, in his studio at the monastery near Milan, but gradually he retreated from public view. He held his last significant American show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1967, and seldom exhibited or sold his work thereafter. His long absence from New York, coupled with a growing mistrust of organized religion in Western society, led most artists, critics, collectors, and curators to overlook his earlier paintings. Consciously or not, they wrote him out of the annals of the New York School and, by extension, the history of twentieth-century art.

If Congdon's life reads like a case study in how to derail a promising artistic career, it also raises some salient thoughts about the relationship between art and commerce. The paintings from his monastic period, freely

executed yet rarely seen, show some of the countervailing rewards and risks that await artists who work outside the economic mainstream. His descent into relative obscurity, in fact, suggests that there might be limits to how far artists can cloister themselves while still calling their work “art” in any culturally meaningful sense. At times, even Congdon found it hard to take the measure of his work. “I ask myself if I’m really religious, and if I’m really an artist,” he said one foggy afternoon last winter, after painting a small, uninspired landscape. “But it’s difficult to know what religion is, and difficult to know what art is.” A few hours later he “canceled out” the painting, scraping off the still-moist oils with a spatula. It’s tempting to attribute such self-doubt to the weather, or senescence, or the nature of making art. And given the tenor of Congdon’s many other reflections on his life and work, it would be unwise to put too much stock into this one. Still, his comment highlights one of the many perils of working in isolation: the recurring belief that one’s own work is somehow deficient or illegitimate or, still worse, irrelevant. The absence of critical feedback, as many people engaged in solitary pursuits will attest, can often have a crippling effect.

The alternative presents its own pitfalls. Indeed, it’s said again and again that the prevailing consumer culture is poisoning art, and surely the corporate mentality that governs much of the film, music, and publishing industries—to name a few—has many corrosive consequences. In Hollywood, special effects and promotion take increasing precedence over story line and character development. At major record labels, the need for new hits propels many musicians to short-lived stardom before their talent has had time to mature. And in the book trade, the consolidation from more than fifty American publishing houses as recently as 1976 into four behemoths today has created a climate that allows unpublished celebrities to draw seven-figure advances while acclaimed midlist authors go begging. “Serious books are certainly in deep trouble, just like serious movies, serious reporting, serious popular music, serious magazines and, for that matter, serious newspapers,” the media critic Mark Crispin Miller told the *Chicago Tribune* earlier this year.

“The relentless pressures of the so-called marketplace have distorted all our culture industries, placing far too much emphasis on whatever might seem to sell the fastest to the most people.”

Miller adds a welcome counterpoint to the dominant tune of our time: the anthem of free markets, globalization, and economic growth. Yet he leaves us wondering, what’s a serious artist to do? Opting out, as Congdon did for arguably more complex reasons, may not be the best response. What if it turns out, after all, that the commodification and commercialization of art also has some salutary results? That the imperative to transform creative process into product can light new creative sparks? That the market might somehow serve the muse, and not the other way around? My intention here is not to peddle capitalist bromides, but to show that for all the damage that money may wreak on the arts, the arts cannot exist without it. It’s not simply that artists need money to buy their materials, or even to eat. Surely the Florentine Renaissance could not have come about without the Medicis. Nor, to take a more recent and contested example, could painters like David Salle and Jeff Koons have prospered as they did in the 1980s without the influx of investment bankers looking for stylish ways to spend their bonuses. But the relationship between art and commerce runs deeper than that, for it’s only by concretizing the creative impulse, by transforming raw inspiration into sensate objects—poems and paintings, films and audio disks, even something as “ephemeral” as a dance—that artists can share their vision with others.

The dilemma for serious artists, then, is how to sell without selling out. Some walk the tightrope by taking money as their theme. A few years ago the performance artist and choreographer Ann Carlson prepared for a new solo by enrolling in a livestock auctioneering school. The piece, called “Sold,” fused Marxist, feminist, and postmodern sensibilities by casting Carlson as a latter-day bartered bride. She danced in a white wedding dress while soliloquizing on the auction block. The choreographer Karole Armitage took a similar tack with “The Predator’s Ball,” her 1996 hip-hop opera about the junk-bond king Michael Milken. It was, admittedly, an

unusual subject for a choreographer. “What Drexel and Milken did was terrible for the country, the industry, and the businesses involved,” the financier Felix G. Rohatyn, a former board member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, told me shortly before the premiere. “I would be surprised if this were a subject that lent itself to dance. It seems a bit far-fetched.” But Armitage, who jolted the dance world in the late 1970s with her unorthodox blend of ballet and punk rock, has a reputation for flouting convention. “Milken is a tremendously complex figure,” she explained. “He embodied the American Dream in such classic ways: pioneering a new frontier, incredible work ethic, real family values, great salesman. But his lust for control was demonic.” “The Predator’s Ball” may have fallen short of its potential, but the line of thinking that led Armitage to mount her postmodern Aristotelian tragedy proves instructive. In an age when Wall Street so thoroughly permeates the American psyche, she concluded, an artist would be foolish not to mine the money culture for subject matter.

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Carlson and Armitage tend to play to an initiated few, but lately some equally “serious” artists have shown that it’s possible, if tricky, to reach a mass market without corrupting their art. Julie Taymor, long known for her phantasmagoric puppet shows, braved the den of commercialism when she agreed to direct a stage version of Disney’s film *The Lion King*. Rather than compromising her artistic integrity, however, she’s widely regarded as having ushered Broadway into a new era of creative possibilities. Her critically acclaimed production not only won six Tony Awards, including best musical, but also became the season’s biggest box-office draw.

Some maverick musicians have also found ways to make the market work for them. The Dave Matthews Band toured the country for years before setting foot in a recording studio, thus developing a loyal audience without risking overexposure. Playing recently to a sold-out crowd at Giant Stadium, it captured the perplexing spirit of the age by fusing its mellifluous polyglot rhythms with what one reviewer called “the cracked, capricious wail of Dave Matthews.” Sonic Youth, in a more brazen subversion of the industry, agreed

to promote an album by headlining the 1995 Lollapalooza festival, the summer road show for alternative rockers. It took its earnings from the tour and built its own sixteen-track recording studio, where members of the band can now develop new material at their own pace. “We can operate in these two different worlds,” guitarist Lee Ranaldo told *The New York Times* last spring. “We’ve got one foot completely in the indie camp, which is basically where our hearts have always been. But we also get to see how the other half lives, almost in this espionage kind of way.” It bears emphasizing that both bands engage the market, albeit largely on their own terms. Otherwise, their music might never be heard. What’s more, their music almost certainly would not sound the same, or even, possibly, as good.

The idea that the market might exert an influence that’s capable of improving art, and not just aiding its dissemination, certainly runs counter to conventional wisdom. At least since the Romantic poets, Western cultures have clung to the archetype of a starving artist toiling alone in a garret. There will always be a need for iconoclasts who are willing to work at the fringes of society, but they may not always be the best exemplars for people engaged in creative work. In “Shapinsky’s Karma,” an essay published several years ago in *The New Yorker*, Lawrence Weschler tells the story of a man who, like Congdon, painted in prolonged seclusion. Harold Shapinsky was an abstract expressionist who took part in his first gallery show in 1950. His career was promptly cut short by the draft board, and after his discharge in 1952 he spent decades painting in the anonymity of his Manhattan walk-up. When Weschler came across his work in 1984, during the early stages of the art world’s last feeding frenzy, Shapinsky was still hewing to the aesthetic he had adopted more than thirty years earlier. Weschler found the results rather odd. “It was amazing: isolated, utterly alone, working for no one but himself, unconcerned about wider acceptance, not kowtowing to any gallery or potential moneyed patrons, Shapinsky had almost managed to make time stand still,” he wrote. Then later: “But the main thing about [his paintings] was this sense of their being frozen in time. Perhaps, ironically, one of the

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functions of occasional gallery shows for an artist is to force him or her to focus and summarize and then to push forward to the next thing. Shapinsky never seemed to feel that pressure.”

One might expect Congdon’s body of work to be similarly static. “In a way, he’s a kind of Rip Van Winkle,” says Fred Licht, a curator at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, which owns three Congdons. “He continued action painting and its ideals undiluted into our time.” But Licht means it as a compliment. By shutting himself away from the art world, he says, Congdon freed himself from worldly distractions and grew ever more attentive to his muse. At the monastery, he had an apartment to himself, with an adjoining studio that overlooked two fields cleft by an irrigation ditch and a stand of trees. He painted the scene hundreds of times, but made a point of always keeping his back to the window while painting. He preferred to observe at his leisure and then, if and when the urge arose, to paint from emotional memory. Repetition was never a concern. “To paint the same subject is to paint no subject,” he once wrote, “but rather always one’s ever-changing self.” With time his paintings grew quieter, more abstract, and he evolved from a painter of stark contrasts into a talented colorist, proving himself an exception to Weschler’s rule.

Still, the work is problematic. During his last few decades, Congdon led an industrious yet reclusive life that calls to mind the conundrum about trees falling in the forest. If an artist paints in monastic seclusion, and no one sees his work, does he make any art? The answer, with paintings and trees alike, depends largely on definitions. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (Harper Collins, 1996), would likely say that Congdon has not manifested creativity—and that his later paintings do not constitute art because “[c]reativity cannot be separated from its recognition” and because a “creative person must convince the field that he or she has made a valuable innovation.” Congdon has had no such impact. At least, not in any lasting way, and not yet. It’s been years since a major museum hung his work in public view; most store their Congdons with countless other works deemed too marginal to show and too meaningful to sell.

Csikszentmihalyi would not begrudge a person who paints for his own gratification, or even, in one possible interpretation of Congdon’s life, to save his soul. Nor would he hasten to conclude that Congdon’s paintings will never win favor. The art world is, after all, a place where reputations can rise and fall with the volatility of stocks. Consider the posthumous success of Emily Dickinson. For nearly twenty-five years she sent her work to an established man of letters, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and while he often replied that he admired her “beautiful thoughts and words,” he could not quite make sense of them as poetry. Not until after Dickinson’s death in 1886, when her sister came across a box of some nine hundred poems, did any of her verses see publication. (In one, ironically, she reveled in her anonymity: “I’m nobody/Who are you?/Are you Nobody—too?/Then there’s a pair of us?/Don’t tell—they’d advertise—you know!/How dreary to be somebody/How public, like a Frog/To tell one’s name—/the livelong June/to an admiring bog.”) Or, consider the more striking case of van Gogh, who sold just one painting before taking his own life in 1890, at the age of thirty-seven. A century later, after five minutes of bidding at Christie’s, the Japanese paper magnate Ryoei Saito bought one of the artist’s last paintings for \$82.5 million. As Cynthia Saltzman notes in *Portrait of Dr. Gachet: The Story of a van Gogh Masterpiece* (Viking, 1998), it was the highest price ever paid at public sale for a work of art. Van Gogh almost certainly would have been troubled by such a turn of events. Although he desperately wanted to find buyers for his paintings, he wanted even more for people to understand his work. And while he might have taken some satisfaction from the fact that Saito was later convicted on unrelated bribery charges and died, in 1996, while serving a prison term, he would surely be irritated to learn that “The Portrait of Dr. Gachet” is now kept under wraps in a Tokyo warehouse.

A sizable portion of Congdon’s creative output also sits under lock and key, in a climate-controlled vault near Milan. It turns out that, monasticism aside, he was still partially beholden to the almighty dollar. Drawing on his inheritance

from his parents, a steel baron and a cotton heiress, he not only covered his modest living expenses but, more importantly, set up a foundation to preserve and promote his work. Its climate-controlled vault, and the walls of its offices, hold some four hundred of his paintings, dating back fifty years. The oil has long since dried, and the painter was laid to rest months ago, yet by Csikszentmihalyi's reckoning the paintings remain incomplete, and may ever remain so. Unless and until they find a receptive audience, they will remain, in Csikszentmihalyi's words, only "potentially creative." That is, they are not quite art. Indeed, painting in monastic seclusion may prove cathartic, expressive, and even insightful. But as long as it lacks a social dimension, its cultural significance will be greatly, if not entirely, diminished. Art needs a forum, and in any monetary society that forum is likely to be the marketplace. (In its original Latin usage, of course, the word *forum* referred explicitly to the place where consumer goods were bought and sold.) An artist who refrains from showing or selling her work may avoid the taint of commerce, but she will be hard put to leave her mark on culture. In the marketplace for art, transactions can be crass and inelegant, but they are also necessary, both as a sounding board for the artist and as a medium for exchanging ideas.

There may be a lesson here for arts journalists, who increasingly find themselves under pressure to turn out capsule reviews and cursory profiles that treat art almost exclusively as a commercial product. Only publishers and editors can furnish the time and money that quality coverage requires, and only readers can move them to do it. Yet even while working within the constraints of today's newsroom, arts reporters and critics might improve their coverage by addressing what I'll call process, product, and place. By process I mean the artist's creative activities: identifying a problem or challenge, finding inspiration, and employing the craft she has mastered. By product I mean the outcome: the painting, poem, or dance that can, usually for a price, be experienced by others. And by place I mean situating the work within broader intellectual and cultural traditions. Given the nature of the news business, arts reporters and critics may still have to peg their pieces to consumer events

like film premieres, gallery openings, and book readings. But that shouldn't stop them from illuminating the thinking that went into making art or contributing to the cultural discourse that transcends continents and centuries.

Congdon, through willful neglect, might have missed his chance to have his paintings become a part of that dialogue. Or, like Dickinson and van Gogh, he may be among the lucky few, the creative recluses whose work finds posthumous favor. Soon after Congdon's death last April, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, in Providence, hung a pair of his paintings from 1951 and 1961. The museum's curator for painting and sculpture, moreover, has expressed interest in mounting an exhibit that would include later works as well. And this fall, while the Whitney hosts a major retrospective on Rothko and MoMA mounts one on Pollock, Congdon, in a lesser way, will also receive some attention. The city of Madrid has asked his foundation to pull seventy paintings from its vault for an exhibition in November. When the paintings are unveiled, some viewers may come to share Betty Parson's long-forgotten appraisal of the artist. "Congdon had the feeling," Parsons once said. "He didn't give a damn for pretty pictures. He wanted to capture the feeling."

A few years ago, Congdon was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. The ailment caused his fingers to tremble involuntarily, upsetting him so much that he could not bring himself to paint. Then, last fall, he grew compelled to paint an image he had seen in a photograph: an ocean-going tanker beached on the sands of Venezuela. Strangely, when he sat before his easel and daubed paint onto a masonite board with his palette knife, his hands moved with the confident precision of a surgeon. It was as if his body contained two parallel neural networks: one that governed ordinary motor skills, and another, resistant to Parkinson's, that took over when he painted. Or perhaps the rapture of creating was a remedy. Either way, it was enough to keep him painting into early spring. He died of a heart attack on April 15, 1998, the eighty-sixth anniversary of both his birth and the sinking of the *Titanic*.