

## CULTURECIDE

One could argue that the Gulag did not kill the Russian soul, that the Holocaust strengthened Judaism and that the persecution of Christians defined their faith. One could further remark that the accoutrements of raw power — the cross bow, catapults, pistols, flame throwers and B-2 bombers — always end up in the junk yard of history or as scurrilous objects stored in war museums no one visits. Or that Genghis Kahn, “the perfect warrior” and symbol of relentless cruelty, or conquerors such as the Visigoth Alaric I, Emperor Louis IV of Bavaria, General Kuropatkin or the name of the squadron leader of the bombers which destroyed Dresden have mercifully faded into the second dimension. Would Louis IX be remembered without the Sainte Chapelle, or the scrofulous Sun King without Versailles? Would one visit the Vatican or Liechtenstein without their princely collections?

Webster’s dictionary asserts that culture trains the mind, refines thought, leads to civilized behaviour and in the end differentiates us from animals. No wonder that the devastators who unleash the high passions of war or impose ideological or religious servitude, the preverse engineers of humankind which turn people into mobs clamoring for self immolation or vaporization, *must* destroy the cultural identity of nations and suppress creative freedom.

Pol Pot’s obscene purism in Kampuchea, Hitler’s and Stalin’s choice of deadening art and architecture, Nicolas Ceausescu’s ongoing destruction of 7000 Romanian villages for the purpose of “systematization,” the eradication of Tibetan monuments and customs, the wanton destruction of the Byzantine heritage in Cyprus in fact attest to the power of cultural artifacts which must be destroyed if dehumanizing utopias are to succeed.

In his bestselling “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers” (Vintage 1989), Paul Kennedy stipulated that national stability must be backed up by military might. In the short run this may be true. In the long run however ambitious rulers have always known that their support of a free cultural expression, a true contemporary modernity would inscribe them in the memory of future generations,

and they knew that a dictatorial erasure of the cultural identity of their people would move them to the back-burners of history. The present leaders of France — which surely is no military superpower — Mitterand and the minister of culture Jack Lang are acutely aware of culture and power and have allocated large sums for the support of the arts and architecture. While the creative energy of Europe and the Pacific rim is coalescing, and the Berlin Wall, as Heinrich Böll predicted, is becoming a historic monument whose graffiti will be preserved, an ebbing creativity in the increasingly television-dominated United States is being hounded by intellectual midgits. Votes in Congress defining a wide range of shocking, forbidden and thus unfindable topics reflect a fear of daring reflections of national problems such as the disappearance of mythologies, newly acknowledged biological facts, the increasing inhumanity of urban life, the mistrust of government. These are items which the carthartic vision of artists must bring out in the open before they fester in America’s soul.

Every large scale destruction of artifacts or autocratic *reglementation* of taste such as the iconoclastic movements in the eighth, the sixteenth, and the twentieth centuries which obliterated unwanted expressions of the human station were and are in fact an admission of weakness imposed by inept political systems whose falacious cultural tomtom and pabulum art forms expose rather than bolster their lies. Free artistic expression is and will remain the essence of a thriving and secure national persona and the honest barometer of its energy level.

The paintings and architecture described in this ninth volume of *Athanos* were fed by individual or communal commitments which made not only their creation possible, but also guaranteed their survival. It might be time for us to insist on the appointment of a minister of culture, and even more so to convince the government of the political power inherent in daring, honest and truly contemporary art. The small sums spent to further frank cultural exchanges have more often than not produced creative responses which have always reverberated around the globe.

François Bucher, Faculty Advisor  
Professor of Art History, Florida State University