

## Thoughts on a Neo-Victorian Age

These are changing times. The giants of the 20th century lie dismembered, weakened or dormant. The global chessboard has acquired new squares and strangely profiled figures. A larger table is needed to accommodate a multiplicity of new players. Humanity seems less in turmoil than in fermentation. Linear confrontation is giving way to circular patterns with multiple tangents. Within the center, governed by a sense of common humanness, heightening the awareness of global interdependence, questions are being asked and answers found which will energize and shape the 21st century. This centripetal trend of history is many layered and expressed in semantic changes, the most important being the renaming of our planet which may be called "the world" (*Le Monde, die Welt*), to the more humble and descriptive "earth" (*la terre, die Erde*). The heads of state traveling to the important ecological meeting in Rio de Janeiro in June will not attend a World Conference, but the Earth Summit to tentatively map the future of mammals. Nostalgia, a powerful emotion, is on the rise. It makes the purchase of houses in the neo-Victorian towns Seaside (FL) or Kentlands (MD) desirable. Factories recreate "plantation bricks," and Disney dedicates huge complexes to the most spectacular architecture of the past, such as Piazza di San Marco, while Ricardo Bofill recreates 18th century palaces and Robert A. M. Stern a Richardsonian library in Concord (NH). The auction houses shudder at the devaluation of abstract expressionists such as Twombly and marvel at the rising prices of old masters and genre scenes. Buyers increasingly return to pictures of nature, human dynamics, the illustrative naiveté of 19th century scenes.

It is perhaps not coincidental that none of the essays in this issue of *Athanos*, written by students who can roam through the history at will, deal with truly abstract art. Instead they describe works whose imagery is easily connectable with familiar situations or events, and iconographies which lie within the mainstream of the history of art. Some of the essays will extend our subject understanding (Curry, Diket, Vendryes,

Blackwell, Westcott); or our insight into the creative process accompanying the blocking out and carving of Romanesque sculpture (Travis). Others play before large cultural backdrops (Martinez, Williams), or analyze the marketing of large quantities of pictures (Bayer). Even Venturi's Guildhouse facade, as ironic as it may seem, is anchored in the Viennese socialist apartment complexes of the 1920s, and slowly begins a retrogressive development culminating in his addition to the London National Gallery. Only Naum Gabo's *Tête Construite* serves as a reminder of the breakup of an immediate visible reality, a destruction of heavy matter which was to characterize the great movements of 20th century art (Mattingly). It now seems unlikely that the deconstructivist monumental adventures of artists and architects such as Claes Oldenburg, Lebbeus Woods or Wolf D. Prix, who according to Philip Johnson express "a slippery, meaningless world where certainty is not even desired, much less attainable" are going to remain relevant to the present generation. In fact, Wolf Vostell's proposal to crush the Berlin Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts of Mies van der Rohe with a giant mixer, which seemed witty and irreverent in 1968, now begins to seem somewhat ludicrous. Victorian art and architecture are rarely perceived as a Renaissance, a vital blossoming of eclecticism, toward which we seem to be heading.

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