

When Art Becomes a Target: The Troubling Defense of Vandalism

By Theodore Dalrymple

When the law, however reasonable it might be, is not respected by a significant part of the educated class, serious social conflict is likely, if it has not already occurred.



Activists with Just Stop Oil glue their hands to the wall after throwing soup at Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" at the National Gallery in London, UK, on Oct. 14, 2022. Just Stop Oil/Handout via Reuters

In England and elsewhere, unfortunately, many of the intelligentsia now believe that if the law is broken in a supposedly good cause, the lawbreakers should not be punished. A recent article in the Guardian newspaper begins:

“More than 100 artists, curators and art historians are making a plea for two activists who hurled tomato soup at Van Gogh’s Sunflowers [in the National Gallery, London] to be spared a

jail sentence.”

Among the signatories were academics from New York, Copenhagen, and other foreign universities, suggesting that the moral pathology is not British alone.

Their [principal argument](#) was that iconoclasm has been a tradition both in political protest and Western art since 1900. For example, they cite the damage done with a meat cleaver to John Singer Sargent’s portrait of Henry James in 1914 by a suffragette.

But this argument is good in this case only if that action was good. And that action was good only if the end justified the means. In essence, the artists and the academics who signed the plea to exonerate the two activists, and who evidently did not stop to think that the action of the suffragette might have been other than saintly or beyond criticism, were at one with the Taliban when it destroyed the statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan and with the Islamic State when it destroyed Palmyra. True, the ends of the two activists who threw the soup at the van Gogh were different: they wanted to save the world from overheating by fossil fuels, whereas the Taliban and the Islamic State wanted to save it from paganism and idolatry. For all of them, though, the end justified the means: But their actions were those of barbarians, and we should never forget that barbarism is fun.

Those in favor of exoneration claimed also that the act of vandalism was itself a work of art, and the soup that the activists threw should be viewed as “a [Jackson] Pollock-esque splatter across the mustard yellow drooping blooms,” that is to say, “a sight to behold.”

These activists should not receive custodial sentences for an act that connects entirely to the artistic canon.

The reference to the “canon” was to a canon that was severely foreshortened: It did not include Piero della Francesca, for example, or Velasquez or Chardin. It referred, rather, to

Robert Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning and the Chapman brothers' damage to some Goya prints of "The Disasters of War."

This is the canon of people for whom anything other than the recent past is the Dark Ages, or what Muslims call the Age of Ignorance, *jahiliyyah*. It does not occur to them that their so-called canon was itself not that of the acme of Western artistic achievement—rather the reverse, in fact. To put the Chapman brothers' work in the same category as that of, say, Rembrandt or Vermeer is like calling *the Whopper* the highest cuisine possible. No one would call it such, not even the purveyors of the Whopper.

The artists, curators, and academics who signed the plea, and in effect praised the soup-throwers, did not stop to think about what the practical effect of this kind of behavior would be if not repressed. Every person with a cause he considered good might be encouraged to damage objects of the artistic heritage to draw attention to his cause, and security would have to be increased to the point of making these objects much less accessible to the public.

Of course, vandalism in the name of a good cause would be permitted only for those causes that found favor with the intelligentsia of the day: One can just imagine the outcry if someone damaged a painting in protest against illegal immigration. The result, *de facto*, would be publicly licensed vandalism.

There is no end to the depths of absurdity to which some people will sink. The throwing of the soup at the painting, they say, "will inevitably enrich the story and social meaning of *Sunflowers*; and will be remembered, discussed and valued in itself as a creative and incisive work."

This is also true of the theft in 1934 of one of the panels of the magnificent van Eyck altarpiece in Ghent in Belgium. The theft has never been elucidated and has happily occupied many amateur detectives for nearly a century. What a splendid

artistic act was the theft, which stimulated so much thought and the writing of so many books about art and crime!

As I read the open letter, I could not but recall William Blades's little polemic, "The Enemies of Books." Blades (1824–1890) was an English printer and bibliographer whose polemic was published in 1880. He devoted chapters to fire, water, gas and heat, dust and neglect, ignorance and bigotry, the bookworm, other vermin, bookbinders, servants and children, and by no means the least, collectors of books.

As an avid and indeed obsessional accumulator of books, particularly second-hand, I am all too aware of many of these dangers: the scribbles of children, what booksellers call the pinholes left through the pages by the boring of the larvae of various kinds of insects, the watermarks left by people who have read their books while in the bath, and even the acrid smell of continual pipe or cigarette smokers who have read the book through while smoking. The causes are not mutually exclusive and can be what Kimberlé Crenshaw, one of the originators of Critical Race Theory, would no doubt call *intersectional*: Blades recounts the story of a servant who used the pages of a Caxton Bible to light a fire.

My point, however, is this: that among the worst enemies of art in the modern world, apart from those hardy perennials ignorance and bigotry, are those who defend, appreciate, and even promote the vandalism of public collections.

I am glad to say that the judge in the case took no notice of the letter and sentenced the two young women to prison. William Blades would have approved.

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