

# The Creator and the Creation



by Michael Curtis

**The intellect of man is forced to choose perfection of the life, or of the work.**

A persisting problem is the distinction to be made between the creator and what is created. The fundamental issue, succinctly stated by Jacques Maritain is that a "man may be a great artist and be a bad man." Art by itself, he wrote, tends to the good of the work, not to the good of man. Yet, does it conflict with moral values that the first responsibility of the artist is toward his work?

How then should we judge individuals and their cultural product? How to judge Caravaggio, Italian painter who developed a form of chiaroscuro and dramatic staging of light and shade, but was a person of volatile character, a murderer, one who killed a rival on a tennis court, and a self-destructive genius? Should he be judged based on his contribution to art or in accordance with his immoral or debauched nature?

The general problem is that the cultural creation, in art or literature is rarely, with important exceptions such as *Guernica*, related to moral values.

One may indicate a few of the countless number of individuals about whom judgement is controversial. Ezra Pound, honored poet, but traitor who gave anti-American and antisemitic radio broadcasts in Italy during World War II. Paul Gauguin abandoned his wife and five children in France to paint and lead an lustful sexual life in Tahiti, and to infect children of 13 and 14 with syphilis. Would you cross the street to greet Edgar Degas? He has been considered a modernist master but he was a strong advocate, like Cezanne and Renoir, of the guilt of Alfred Dreyfus. A vicious antisemite, he ended relationship with Jewish friends such as Ludovic Halevy and Camille Pissarro, the Jewish impressionist.

Linda Nochlin, the art historian, once wrote, controversially, that the effect of antisemitism was absolutely minimal on Degas's art. Even if this is valid, though unlikely, can the same conclusion be argued about Richard Wagner whose antisemitic sentiments are uncontested, openly articulated?

In his case, the two related questions are: the extent to which his antisemitism informed his musical compositions; and whether one should be aware of that depth in order to assess his music. Relatedly, can the conducting of Herbert von Karajan, be less admired knowing he was a Nazi?

The behavior of recent cultural figures makes assessment difficult. Eric Gill, brilliant British Catholic sculptor, whose work adorns the front of Broadcasting House, the BBC headquarters in London, seduced his sister and his daughters. Francis Bacon, successful painter of screaming faces and dying popes, was an obnoxious drunk, sadist, and sexually gay predator.

Philip Larkin, the poet who was a university librarian and a jazz lover, wrote offensive material about blacks and was a racist. Benjamin Britten, arguably the most significant modern British composer, was attracted to and obsessed by underage boys, he was a pedophile. Yet, before condemning him, his predicament can be appreciated by listening to his opera *Peter*

*Grimes* in which a lonely man kills a boy.

Legacies are complicated. Take three examples, Sadly, we are confronted with contemporary cases. James Levine, charismatic conductor of the Metropolitan Opera for 40 years, 1976-2016, and active with the Munich Philharmonic and Boston Symphony, was accused of allegations of sexual misconduct, psychological manipulation, and harassing conduct towards vulnerable individuals in the early stages of their careers, over whom he had authority. At his last performance at the Met, on December 2, 2017, he conducted Verdi's *Requiem*. The text includes, "when the judge comes to give strict justice, whatever is hidden shall be revealed. Nothing shall go unpunished."

Frank Sinatra, arguably the most important pop singer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who records sold more than 150 million copies was a complicated character. A vocal angel, and often a generous man, yet he had relations with the Mafia and gambling rings, had a bad temper physically assaulted people, including wives and other women, and employees and property, and occasionally threatened to commit suicide. Appropriately, the song, *The Best is Yet to Come*, is on his tombstone.

And there is Stan Getz, born to a Jewish couple from Ukraine, who starting at age 16 was perhaps the most melodist tenor sax player in jazz, relaxed and lyrical, continually inventive melodically and harmonically. Unfortunately, he was addicted to heroin for a time, was imprisoned for six months for trying to rob a drug store to get some drugs., and was cruel to his wives. His drug habit, and drinking, affected his character, often volatile off stage, leading fellow sax player Zoot Sims, to call Getz "a nice bunch of guys." In spite of the fact that Getz continued to be musically inventive and to produce some of the most important jazz albums of his day, he had periods of alcohol abuse and depression before becoming sober in his last years.

Who should we honor of the culture creators?

Publications during April 2022 of biographies of two major cultural figures, Charles Dickens and Pablo Picasso again raise the question of judgment of individuals.

Charles Dickens, 1812- 1870, beginning as a journalist, wrote 15 novels, countless short stories, essays, and edited a weekly journal for 20 years. His background is well-known, suffering poverty as a child, he was self-educated, he was taken out of school and worked at age 12 for ten hours a day at a boot polishing factory, while his father was in a debtor's prison. He has a full life, novelist, editor, amateur actor, social activist.

Dickens was the classic embodiment of an author, rising from rags to riches, a highly admired figure home and abroad, a gifted creator of characters and personalities. He produced in *A Christmas Carol* what may be regarded as the most popular piece of fiction. Dickens was a theater enthusiast, even performing as an actor before Queen Victoria. He also lectured against slavery, epidemics, mob mania, and wrote critically of hypocrites, pomposity, and oppressors of parts of society, especially of children.

But Dickens has been accused on two issues: he was not a praise-worthy character, he was a bad husband and father, and his "dark" novels, such as *Bleak House* and *Dombey and Son* reflected part of his own personality; and he is accused of racism, xenophobia, and imperialism. Was he antisemitic? Besides the general portrait of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, the character is mentioned as a Jew more than 250 times. He did leave his wife after having ten children, and then lived with actress 18 year old Ellen Ternan. He is buried in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

The accusations that Dickens was a racist arise from his comments at different times and places about India, particularly during his attitude to the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 when 120 British women and children were killed, China,

Ireland, and British colonial activity. He is accused of being dismissive of "primitive" cultures. Though he spoke against slavery, he supported the Confederacy during the American civil war.

And finally, there is the problem of how to judge Pablo Picasso. It is taken for granted by most people that he is the greatest artist of the last century and was an innovator and creator of incomparable innovative techniques in his enormous output of sculptures, paintings, prints and drawings. The initial problem in assessing the relation in his case between the creator and the creation is that he called himself a public entertainer who understood his times and benefited. It has been said that each of his works is a unique piece of autobiography, a particular moment in his life, exhibiting virility and power. He himself said that his work can be seen in seven different styles, each a document of the relationship with the seven women in his life, from Fernande Olivier to Jacqueline Roque. He cheated on and treated them all badly, and made them miserable except Francoise Gilot.

He was great artist, a monster of incredible energy and constant work, but he was a narcissist, cold, unfeeling, and denigrator perhaps hatred, of women. So, we are left with the starting problem: should we admire him or take his work seriously or castigate him because he was so abusive to women? Whatever one's final view of Picasso, we still have *Guernica*, his fierce reaction to the Nazi bombing of the Basque town, showing the horror of war, suffering of innocent civilians, and murders of children.

In view of the atrocities in Ukraine, the painting is a reflection on and an indictment of the war criminal Vladimir Putin.