

## EXHIBITS

# Lessons of the Art of 1492

**Fidelio:** That story was untrue, and Reuters News Service retracted it.

**LO:** Yes, I was sure that it was untrue and I spoke about that all over. But, unfortunately, some people had already read or heard that, and it's tough to counter it.

### Culture and Politics In a Time of Crisis

**Fidelio:** In Lithuania, Vytautas Landsbergis is head of state and he's a musician. In Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel is president, and he's a playwright. How do you see this growing trend of newly freed nations in Eastern Europe calling on cultural figures to give political leadership in this time of crisis?

**LO:** It's amazing, because under the communist system, musicians and artists were in a terrible position. Writers couldn't express their feelings, their fears, the experiences that they had under the communist system, so a lot of them, in our country, were jailed, just because of their opinions. It's hard for me to express this in English, but [voting for cultural figures] is a way to express the free spirit that was preserved in the circumstances we passed through.

**Fidelio:** What program have you chosen for your concerts here?

**LO:** It depends always on the organ. In Florida, I included one of the Croatian composers, and I played one elegy, a very sad composition, because my mood was sad. It was full of folk elements of our country. I also played Romantic and Baroque music.

Here in Baltimore, because of the type of organ, I played Baroque music, but always at the end of the concert I played a piece from the St. Matthew Passion of J.S. Bach, in memory of all the children and civilians who have been killed in the war.

**Fidelio:** I'm sure that's had a good effect on people.

**LO:** I think so. I hope that in this kind of expression, a musical kind, people can understand much more about our feelings, and can share them with us. We are grateful for every move that you make here in America.

In celebration of the Quincentary of the Discovery of America by Columbus, the National Gallery of Art mounted a glorious exhibit entitled "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration" this past autumn. Although not about history as such, this exhibit of over 600 objects from the Mediterranean world, east Asia, and the Americas in the half-century around 1492, provided the crucial clue for evaluating not only the past but where we are going today. The clue is the necessity of progress. Therein, we find beauty.

Although the exhibit, on view only in Washington from Oct. 12, 1991 to Jan. 12, 1992, has now closed, several hundred thousand visitors took advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. A handsome 672-page catalogue published by Yale University Press and the National Gallery (\$45 paper, \$59.95 hardbound) remains.

The Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century, which unified art and science as never before, was the response of Western Christendom to the terrifying challenge of uncontrolled nature—in this case, epidemic disease, the Black Death, which wiped out as much as fifty per cent of the urban population in many parts of Europe, including the proud city of Florence, Europe's banking capital, in 1348.

In the decades leading up to 1492, theoretical and applied science were brought together in a republican political movement which gave birth to momentous breakthroughs in technology:

the discovery of perspective in painting, the development of anatomy as a science, a revolution in navigation, the invention of printing, revolutions in mapmaking and astronomy. The art of not only Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer, who were both thriving artists in 1492 and whose works crown the exhibit's first, European section, but of many other geniuses on display here—Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, Uccello, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Pollaiuolo, even Michelangelo—celebrated the creative power of the unique individual to make such discoveries, and the willingness of political leaders to organize society so as to realize these inventions to change the physical world.

### Renaissance Image of Man

We see that celebration of the individ-



Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of a Lady with an Ermine (Cecilia Gallerani), c. 1490.

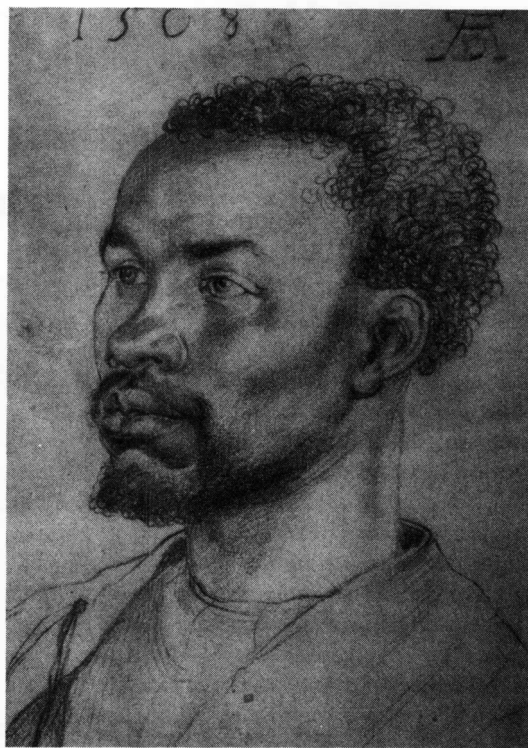
Czartoryski Museum, Cracow

ual's potential in the portraits by Dürer and Leonardo in the show, especially the enticing "Cecilia Gallerani," one of only three authentic da Vinci portraits in the world, lent by the museum in Cracow. (Not only are the majority of the portraits commoners, but they are "mere" *women*, which indicates the universality of the Renaissance image of man.) But it is also synthesized in Botticelli's portrait-like St. Augustine, the African-born father of European civilization, who is depicted as a typical humanist scholar of the fifteenth century receiving a divine illumination through the medium of an armillary sphere, an instrument for charting the course of the stars!

Thus it was, that by 1500 Italy had recovered the population lost through the bubonic plagues of the previous century. This was the quality of ideas—however incompletely they were understood and applied by some—behind the evangelization of the Americas.

The discoverers included the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci, whose family commissioned Botticelli's "St. Augustine" less than two decades before he landed on the shores of South America in 1497, and the great Spaniards Magellan, de Soto, Cabral, Cortés, Balboa, and others whose names ought to be known to every American. Splendid examples of the maps and scientific instruments that accompanied their progress are a focus of the exhibit, many of them coming from Dürer's home town of Nuremberg, the Florence of the North.

Two great urban centers of the Renaissance—The Netherlands and Italy—contributed to the artistic production of the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella, which sponsored Columbus' voyage in 1492. These great schools of art were deliberately re-exported, with



Albrecht Dürer, Portrait of a Black Man, c. 1505-1506?

Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna

uniquely Iberian ingredients which had been added in the process, into Mexico, Peru, and the other American colonies, becoming the basis for beautiful cities built by indigenous craftsmen, and magnificent polyphonic choirs made up of Indian musicians, in the century after 1492.

### Culture Shock

The second part of the show, "Toward Cathay," shows the "Indies" Columbus expected to find by sailing west to reach the east: Japan, then Korea, China, and finally India, through the art that was produced in each of these countries around 1492. Sophisticated; delicate or voluptuous; impressive or subtle; this art shows technical mastery, yet lacks the notion of the unique individual which was the motor of progress in the West. Indeed, in the 1430s, the Chinese imperial court decreed the burning of the fleet of Admiral Zheng He, whose voyages of exploration had been more advanced than the pioneering navigation efforts of the Europeans at that time. China turned its back on progress.

In the third part, "The Americas," we experience the culture shock the Europeans underwent in their first encounters with indigenous societies. Even more than the art, which consists of many crouching hulks of stone, menacing faces, human beings disguised as animals, and skeletons sporting knives for noses and tongues, the catalogue entries are a grim indictment of a culture which had lost the moral fitness to survive. Every one of the religions which ruled daily life in the Caribbean, Mesoamerican, and Andean regions, as well as the "lands of gold" which lay between the Aztec and Inka empires from Costa Rica to Colombia, was based on the ingestion of hallucinogens to produce "messages" from their gods.

On display from the islands where Columbus first landed, are platforms for sniffing narcotic powder, vomiting spatulas for purging the stomach before trances, and gods in the forms of animal-human transformations, as the drugs they ingested blurred the boundaries between man and beast. In these societies, there was no hint of scientific progress, nor did their "gods" inspire it. Instead, they practiced human sacrifice to keep the universe running—the extremes to which the Aztecs went are notorious—along with slavery, polygamy, and constant warfare.

Five hundred years before Columbus landed, the human-sacrificing empire of the Mayas had become extinct because it could not deal with epidemic disease, probably yellow fever. The same fate was destined to overtake the Aztecs and Inkas, with or without the arrival of outsiders. Indeed, the doom of the Mayas, a more developed society than the Aztecs, compels us to consider that only through the evangelization were the lives of the indigenous Americans saved after 1492.

### A Vicious Dualism

The lesson of the exhibit is clear; the European part shows the celebration of life which became the most positive part of American civilization, enabling Americans to create new freedoms to

combat the grip of the oligarchy in the Old World; the pre-Columbian part is a culture of hopeless brutality and death, only occasionally alleviated by what seems to be humor.

Yet strangely, some of the organizers of the show have drawn the opposite conclusion. No less a pundit than Librarian of Congress Emeritus Daniel Boorstin, in his preface to the catalogue, calls "Circa 1492" an "antidote to the contagion of science." He concocts a dualistic universe in which Man the Discoverer is seen as disparate from (though sometimes complementary to) Man the Creator. In Boorstin's view, Man the Discoverer operates collaboratively in a universal task of pushing back the frontiers of the unknown, but Man the Creator operates alone, as an individual, in the realm of "art" where there is no valid concept of progress. This is the view that Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer fought all their lives!

Moreover, Boorstin, in his domain of Creation divorced from technology and necessity, assumes a "freedom" for diversity and creativity that no Aztec artist could have even imagined. For instance, Aztec musicians, although highly regarded in society, were obliged to play by memory through long religious rituals; the lapse of playing a single drumbeat out of sequence was deemed so displeasing to the deities that it was punished by death. So what is Mr. Boorstin talking about?

He is, in fact, extolling a vicious dualism, the dualism which in another essay in the catalogue, we learn was the essence of the religion of the Aztecs. Every "god" had its twin; the benign and fertile was countered by the hideously destructive.

Boorstin's crazy, ahistorical idea of artistic "freedom," a freedom never available to Aztec (nor, I believe, even to Chinese) artists, leads us down the path of menticide, through today's rock-drug-sex counterculture, and to genocide, through today's predominant economic policies of looting and enslavement.

The exhibit itself told a different story. Thank God.

—Nora Hamerman

## BOOKS

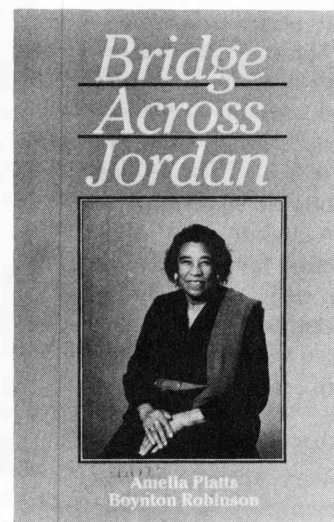
### 'And what the innermost voice conveys, The hoping spirit ne'er that betrays'

*Bridge Across Jordan* permits one a glimpse into the fashioning of true heroism and individual greatness. It is the unfolding history of a black American, Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson, working to realize the promise of a nation to "hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."

This is not a book written by a black woman for black people! Rather it is a book which challenges America and all humanity to recover the will to advance the human dignity of all in the years and decades to come. *Bridge Across Jordan* induces the reader to reflect upon *how* one finds the spirit to conquer apathy, to battle injustice through direct non-violent resistance, and to wield truth as the shocking remedy for bigotry and ignorance, yet retain humility.

Nor is this a book of sentimental reminiscences upon events of the 1960's movement for civil rights! It is more a social history, an American life spanning most of the twentieth century, faithfully chronicled by an individual of extraordinary personal integrity. It is rather a universal testament to the human spirit's ability to face blatant opposition to human freedom, and to cut a path of hope through the wilderness of ignorance and cruelty while realizing the joy and purpose of a personal life worth living for all time.

In her autobiographical work, Mrs. Robinson brings the reader face-to-face with the personal challenge of disarming bigotry and hatred with the sword of non-violent resistance. She conveys how racial oppression affects *real people*, as if they were the reader's own family. She examines the stark reality of a segment of the American population largely unknown to "mainstream" America. The realization of



**Bridge Across Jordan**  
by Amelia Boynton Robinson  
Schiller Institute, Inc.,  
Washington, D.C., 1991  
414 pages, paperback, \$10.00

America's historic purpose among nations is shown to be inexorably intertwined with achieving the freedom and dignity of every single American.

The Christian cultural values inherent in the inspiring, steadfast nature of Mrs. Robinson's life, and the endeavors for which she and her husband, Samuel William Boynton, worked, were reaffirmed, as well, by the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his movement. "Dr. King gave the world the concept of *agapē* as a political principle," states Mrs. Robinson in her book.

Today, as a leader of the Schiller Institute, Mrs. Robinson enriches the quality of that movement by unifying the worldwide resistance to tyranny and injustice, the centuries-long fight by black Americans for human dignity and unfulfilled aspirations of the global republican movement which created the United States.