

Discussed: BBC, cartoons, chaos, Jackson Pollock, provocative images, freedom, cultural foundations, spirituality, artist's craft, religious imagery, grievances, family linen, cheese

Danish Cheese and American Gothic: Thoughts on Depicting the Prophet

By John Hoyt

I was sitting at the kitchen table (taking a break from a productive morning's work in the studio), eating a piece of amazingly pungent Danish cheese and thinking about the stunning vitriol I have heard from callers to the BBC's "World Have Your Say" recently. "You do not have the right to represent our Prophet—peace be upon him—let alone in this demeaning manner....No, we do not have a sense of humor about such things."

So argued many callers, who felt that the decision to print a set of cartoons in a Danish newspaper was an attack on the essence of their religious and cultural identity. In contrast, a number of fellow cheese eaters phoned and e-mailed to contend that this had nothing to do with religion, that the crux of the matter was personal choice and freedom of expression, and that callers who felt differently were thin skinned and humorless.

As I listened to the radio coverage, I marveled at the hours of airtime that the BBC was devoting to an issue that had at its core a few small, black-and-white images that first appeared in a Danish newspaper. How often do the visual arts receive this sort of publicity? Of course,

this was the exception that proved the rule, since no one seemed to be arguing that these cartoons had any sort of artistic merit at all. Yet the issue certainly has implications for all creative people.

One essential role played by the arts throughout history has been to negotiate and attempt to control forces of chaos. In different ways, this applies as much to paleolithic cave painting as it does to the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock. In times of social stability and predictability, established visual conventions may serve well enough; in times of stress and social change, however, artists can be counted on to cast about for

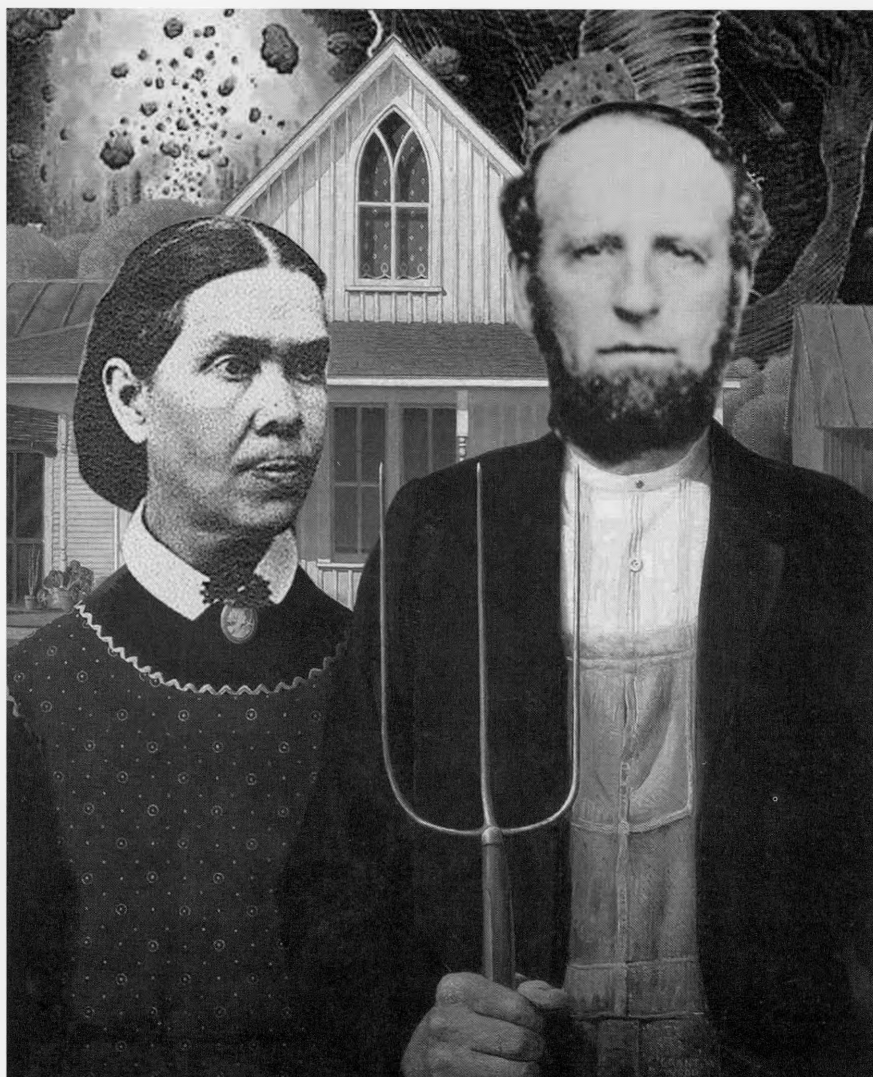
a new set of images and to play with and manipulate traditional iconography in an attempt to expose their dysfunctionality. This helps put into context the need felt by many artists to shock “bourgeois” audiences out of their complacency.

In the early years of modern art, artists often deliberately set out to create provocative images. Of course, this task was easier at that time since there were traditional and accepted norms in place for artists to work against in the areas of sexuality, religion, and politics. Even the violation of accepted rules of color and composition could provoke a reaction from the artistic establishment and visually less-sophisticated audiences.

It seems understandable that young artists today would be looking for areas in which to provoke their audiences—this is in the nature of the visual environment in which they learn their craft. It seems clear, as well, that they are finding the task increasingly difficult. In the context of the art gallery or cinema, sex, blasphemy, “bad” color, and so forth, may at times seem gratuitous and tasteless, but are not likely to provoke much response, let alone be seen as incitement to riot.

Presumably, we have learned a few things from the artistic explorations of the last 150 years or so, and perhaps reflecting on these can help provide a sense of balance as we contemplate possible future directions for the arts. Here are a few thoughts that come to mind as I continue to munch on my cheese:

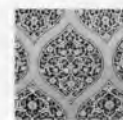
1. Challenging these norms did not necessarily destroy our society. I realize that this point is debatable—for religious and cultural conservatives there has indeed been loss, whereas liberals would argue that these struggles have brought increased liberty, tolerance, and openness. But that, of course, is the point: these ideas continue to be debatable, and people continue to go about their search for their personal idea of the “good”—however misguided that



may seem to us in some cases.

2. Increased freedom need not necessarily erode our cultural foundations. Admittedly, there seems to be less interest in (for example) organized religion in its traditional forms—a pronounced shift away from traditional religious subject matter in painting can be noted as early as the 1700s. Similarly, traditional artistic disciplines (such as easel painting on canvas) may be in decline. But with freedom to reflect and explore have come new understandings of spirituality and of the artist’s craft.

So does the visual artist have the right to manipulate traditional religious imagery in ways that will shock and provoke viewers? My personal response would be a clear Yes, provided these manipulations



(distortions, mockery, and so forth) are understood as the work of an "insider." Christian religious imagery is a part of "our" heritage—it represents a view of the world that has shaped who "we" are; continuing dialogue—however shrill at times—is in the nature of that tradition.

Just who counts as an insider I am not sure. As far as the Christian tradition goes, its influence has been so pervasive that I would hesitate to draw any lines at all. And does the artist need to justify or rationalize such liberties by invoking a greater good of some sort? That is, "I decided to depict the image of a woman crucified on a cross because I felt that..." Please, artists, spare us your rationalizations! Just get on with the painting, poetry, composing, and so forth. If it works, we will pay attention and gradually begin to see things in a new light; if not, we will just look away or change the channel.

But back to the images of the Prophet for a moment: the more I listened to enraged callers, the more I realized I would need to hear a great deal more of this sort of heated—though potentially constructive—discussion before I could begin to see the issues clearly from both points of view. Although trying my best to understand the grievances of Muslim callers, I felt I was listening in on a family that clearly has some linen to sort out, yet I did not feel that I was a member of this family with a contribution to make. And my own family seems to have enough linen of its own at the moment!

I put away the cheese, brushed my teeth carefully, and returned to the studio, hoping to regain the sense of calm that I often find in my work and in this sheltered space. There on the easel was Ellen, in all her youthful splendor, standing calmly on a seashell in the sparkling Aegean: an American upstart aspiring to the ancient pantheon. Yet in spite of my precautions, I could tell immediately from her pursed lips and furrowed brow that she had guessed the truth (as prophets have a habit of doing): *I had been eating cheese again.*

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