

# Can Bad People Make Good Art

by Joan Altabe



An art show was cancelled recently on account of the character of the artist. Richard L. Pattenaude, president of the University of Southern Maine, cancelled the display of paintings by a prison inmate who had killed a state trooper 25 years earlier and considered himself a political prisoner. Pattenaude made his thoughts known in a public letter.

## ONE MAN'S OPINION

He began by noting the school's "longstanding commitment to free speech." But he excused his decision by saying that the inmate's crime "overshadowed" the show, which was to examine the nature of political dissent. "I want to apologize to the people of Maine and elsewhere for the fact that we did not understand earlier the criminal acts associated with this exhibit, nor the sense of outrage and depth of personal pain they generated."

What does an artist's behavior have to do with his art?

I remember thinking that question some years back on reading a New York Times art

critic John Russell's praise of a Degas show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Russell said that Degas' "reserves of human sympathy grow stronger and more pertinent the older we get."

## IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO

Not to me, they don't. I have a hard time reconciling Degas' so-called humanity with what is known of his fierce anti-Semitism, particularly his vociferous defense of the anti-Semitic French military court when it falsely charged, convicted and sentenced to life on Devil's Island an army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, who was an Alsatian Jew.

Even when the real traitor was identified and the French army suppressed the evidence, refusing to free Dreyfus, Degas continued to rail publicly against Dreyfus. When one of his models told him that she believed in Dreyfus' innocence, Degas yelled at her, "You are Jewish, you are Jewish," and ordered her out of his studio. (The model was Protestant, by the way).

But so what? Degas' bigotry has nothing to do with his art.

*Boy with Basket of Fruit*, 1593.  
by Caravaggio  
Galleria Borghese, Rome



## THE ISSUE CAME HOME

I asked myself the same question in 1991 when a Sarasota theater canceled the showing of a movie starring a favorite son, Paul Reubens, a.k.a. Pee-Wee Herman, because he had exposed himself in a local adult movie theater. My answer has to be the same as the one held by all art lovers through the ages: Painters and sculptors throughout history have been caught in punishable acts, but their art remained popular.

Fra Filippo Lippi, a monk and master Renaissance painter of sacred images, stole a fully pledged nun away from a church of which he was chaplain and impregnated her. He lost his clerical office, but he did not lose his standing as an artist.

Caravaggio, the celebrated 17th-century painter of religious works, had an uninterrupted record of crimes, including murder, but never lacked patrons, including churchmen. In fact, the man nearest the papal throne, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, was Caravaggio's most enthusiastic sponsor.

Then there was the Renaissance painter Giovantonio Bazzi, who bore the nickname "Sodoma" for – well, you can guess. But

Sodoma enjoyed great renown because of the excellence of his art.

The list goes on. All told, artists in history have been charged with rape, incest and murder – offenses that would land people in jail today. Yet, none suffered loss of patrons.

Just as I wouldn't dress down a movie for an actor undoing his pants, neither should I disparage a painting by an anti-Semite. For one thing, I'd have to do an awful lot of disparaging. Degas wasn't the only painter who hated Jews. Cezanne, Rodin and Renoir also did – Renoir being the most openly anti-Semitic, next to Degas. Renoir refused to have his work exhibited in the same show with the Jewish artist and fellow Impressionist Camille Pissarro.

The way I figure it, either you're an art lover or you're not. 🍷