

**Buying Into Culture
How commerce cultivates art
Charles Paul Freund**

UNDRESSED but unabashed, *The Venus of Urbino* has been staring slyly back at her admirers for almost 500 years. Completed by the Venetian master painter Titian in 1538, and frequently cited as one of his two or three greatest achievements, *Venus* was soon clothed by her contemporaries in the flimsiest of classical allusions; in fact, there's almost nothing in the portrait suggestive of the mythology that provides an excuse for its eroticism. Generations of critics and art lovers have, in their turn, covered Titian's goddess in a thick drapery of their own: opaque layers of interpretation and explanation of who she is and what she means. Today she hangs in the Uffizi, one of the great art temples of Florence, at once a symbol of fleshy Renaissance humanism and of the spirit of art that is not of this world. For a woman without clothes, *Venus* has worn a lot of guises.

Lately, however, much of this intellectual wrapping is falling away. Emerging from beneath is neither a goddess nor a symbol; nor does the meaning she has been keeping to herself have anything to do with Olympic allegory. Her secret is actually much more interesting, because it is about the forgotten foundations of contemporary culture.

Titian's mythological paintings have drawn a great deal of expert commentary, with people, as usual, seeing what they want to see. Some observers have seen the themes of Latin poetry symbolically expressed, and have turned *Venus* into a literary exercise. Some have placed this painting in the context of Titian's other nudes (he painted many, though this *Venus* is notably more relaxed than most); the modern aesthete Bernard Berenson pronounced these works to be "truly Dionysiac, Bacchanalian triumphs--the triumph of life over the ghosts that love the gloom and chill and hate the sun." Others have focused on such details as the clump of myrtle *Venus* clutches, and have interpreted the whole painting from that. In the symbolic language of flowers, myrtle indicates marital fidelity; thus, according to one 1963 interpretation, Titian's work is an expression of "harmonious, faithful love."

Maybe it is. But listen to the account of this painting and its contemporary reception offered by Lisa Jardine in her 1996 history of the Renaissance, *Worldly Goods*: "Titian's canvases of statuesque naked women in recumbent poses were regarded as learnedly symbolic by nineteenth century art historians....Only recently did contemporary correspondence come to light which showed that these works of art were painted to meet a vigorous demand for bedroom paintings depicting erotic nudes in salacious poses. When Guidobaldo, Duke of Urbino, was negotiating to buy the painting now known as *The Venus of Urbino* from Titian in 1538, he referred to it simply as a painting of 'a naked woman'....In 1542, the churchman Cardinal Farnese saw the painting at Guidobaldo's summer residence and rushed off to commission a similarly erotic nude of his own from Titian in Venice. Reporting back on the progress of the painting some time later, the Papal Nuncio in Venice expressed the view that the Cardinal's nude...made *The Venus of Urbino* look like a frigid nun. In 1600, in response to a request from an admirer of *The Venus of Urbino* to acquire a copy, the then Duke agreed, on condition that the identity of the owner of the original be kept a secret--he did not wish it to be widely known that he was the owner of that kind of painting."

That kind of painting? What about the poetry, the symbolism, and the Dionysiac triumph? According to Jardine, a painter's reputation in Titian's time rested "not on some intrinsic criteria of intellectual worth," but rather "on his ability to arouse commercial interest" in his work.

IT MAY NOT be immediately apparent how radical a judgment this is. After all, that Renaissance culture was deeply interested in the passions is well known. The many paintings of nude women, despite being labelled "Venus" or "Eve," were perceived erotically by their purchasers. Though they are now revered in museums, their original owners often concealed the paintings behind closed curtains, or kept them rolled up and hidden. Many such paintings were probably destroyed when subsequently discovered. But modern students of such work usually examine this phenomenon in light of such specialized interests as the origins of "the pornographic discourse." This has become yet another battlefield of gender studies and sexual identity politics, skirting the central issue of the changing social function of such images.

For that matter, the association of Renaissance cultural genius and accelerating commerce is even more of a commonplace. The sociology of Renaissance art has been well worked over, with critics and historians explaining changes in painterly style and content in terms of a new, social-climbing class, a bourgeois interest in "realism," the status role of patronage, and a variety of similar factors. Scholar Peter Burke, for example, recognized the social and economic process that produced the Renaissance when, in 1972, he demonstrated the significance of the new merchant class that was so quick to patronize new arts. Marx himself argued that such art was shaped more by demand than by supply.

But Jardine is addressing a great deal more than the eroticism of Titian or the commerce that made his patrons rich. She is describing Renaissance painting *itself* as a specifically commercial process. She doesn't deny that its works were shaped by painterly genius; she does believe that such genius expressed itself with an eye on the next

commission, and that the paintings reflect both seller and buyer. And not only paintings; Jardine's point in *Worldly Goods* is that the whole of the Renaissance--art, printing, humanist learning, expanding science, etc.--resulted not only from the release of creative genius made possible by increased wealth and learning (itself a consequence of trade), but from the release of human *acquisitiveness* and the ability of genius to address it (or, as appears to be the case in her tale of Titian, actually to pander to it).

Worldly Goods represents Renaissance culture as a process, the dynamic result of an expanding cultural market. In her view, this culture did not merely depend on a material foundation, it was concerned--to an extraordinary degree--with material ends. Her examination of Carlo Crivelli's 1486 painting, *The Annunciation With St. Emidius*, details the work as a display--if not a boast on the part of the city that commissioned it--of highly desirable consumer goods: embroidered clothing, valuable tapestry, imported carpet, carved reading desk, gilded frieze, brass candlestick, leather-bound books, porcelain dishes, majolica pot, crystal vase, terra cotta carvings, earthenware pots, marble floor, and an array of architectural form and detail. One must look closely to find the Holy Spirit in the crowded painting, not to mention a Virgin whom Crivelli depicts as if she were a proto-shopaholic.

Jardine is as unabashed about her argument as *Venus* is about her nakedness. "[T]hose impulses which we today disparage as 'consumerism,'" she writes, must "occupy a respectable place in the characterization of the new Renaissance mind." Here is cultural achievement that does not necessarily seek to transcend the material world; it may do so, but it remains ever rooted in that world. The implications of such an understanding of culture--especially of the culture that undergirds the Western aesthetic heritage--are considerable.

Jardine, who is dean of the faculty of arts at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, is not alone in addressing culture's debt to the material world that provides its structure, in understanding imaginative creativity as a part of a continuing process, and in celebrating culture as a means not only of self-expression, but of pleasure, however both creator and audience agree to define it. But it is not only the appearance of such a vision that is noteworthy; its timing is particularly striking.

AN AGE OF politics is ending, *The Wall Street Journal* announced in March; a new cultural age has already begun. The paper was inaugurating a new, weekly "Taste" page, to be devoted to cultural controversy, and its introductory remarks were intended as a manifesto. The great ideological struggles of the century have concluded; indeed, argued the *Journal*, the Soviet empire fell not to invading armies, but crumbled under the force of modern culture.

If one takes the meaning of "modern culture" in its broadest sense--the *Journal* defined it as the free decisions of people--then the paper is right on both counts: on the end of history as politics, and on history's renewal as culture.

But there is a real irony in such a transformation, because even as politics recedes, the world of elite culture it is leaving behind is more politicized than it has ever been. Viscerally anti-capitalist, riven by conflicts over gender, class, race, elitism, and identity, the cultural establishment has not only succeeded in suffocating such once-lively forms as poetry and literary fiction by isolating them in institutional settings and severing the vital connection to their readers, it is amusing itself by substituting "simulacra" for reality, and jargonized theories for art and literature.

The world of cultural studies is of course a big one, and many of those shaping it are enlarging and enlivening the concept of culture: The revival of rhetorical studies, the re-examination of the literary canon, the criticism of taste hierarchies, and the attention paid to subcultures have often been insightful and provocative, even if many of these efforts have come to dull and predictable para-Marxist conclusions.

But at the postmodern extreme that has gained widespread institutional ascendancy, some theorists and their disciples have displaced creators and enthroned themselves as the last possible self-expressive seers, at extraordinary cost to their own fields. Much literary and film criticism, for example, is no longer accessible to general readers, and is of no interest to them. Worse, a number of these cultural critics have pronounced history and the soft social sciences--and in some cases the hard sciences, too--to be literary in nature, and therefore ultimately without objective value. Such academic theorizing has become a kind of black hole of human knowledge and achievement, with the result that some vulnerable fields--especially in the social sciences--have approached a state of intellectual collapse.

Even so, the *Journal* is correct, though its view is, unsurprisingly, skewed to the right. "American culture," reads its manifesto, "is at something of a crux," and the paper pauses to welcome signs of what it takes to be a "reassessment" of values. Given the *Journal's* cultural conservatism, the signs it perceives point toward traditionalist cultural authority; important matters, the *Journal* predicts, are going to turn on matters of "taste." But the cultural future belongs neither to conservative nor liberal authoritarians. A culture driven by personal choice is flourishing, indifferent to elites and divorced from taste hierarchies and the traditional concepts of status and authority that supported them; its proliferating, ever-subdividing groupings are overwhelming the very idea of a cultural mainstream over which the old left and right continue to struggle. These are ultimately the cultural forces that crushed the Soviets, and they are everywhere at work.

In recent years, an array of voices has begun to converge from such fields as art, economics, history, and anthropology to re-examine the origins and functions of culture. A number of researchers are, like Jardine, taking a

fresh look at so malevolent a pair of concepts as "commercialization" and "consumption," and reapplying them to cultural activity in unexpected ways.

These thinkers do not constitute a "school" of thought, and do not necessarily agree on many specifics--they do not necessarily admire capitalism, much less commercialism. But they share a significant concern: assessing culture within its material context, especially the use to which individuals may put that context for self-renewal and even self-creation.

CENTRAL TO THIS emerging concept is a line of thought being developed by Canadian anthropologist Grant McCracken, who has been studying the increasing differentiation in "styles of life." For example, McCracken has noted that only a few years ago there were one or two kinds of "youth culture"; now, as a trip to any large mall will reveal, there are over a dozen (including, at the time he studied them, "goths," "punks," "b-boys," etc.), marked by fashion, hairstyle, body language, music preferences, and an array of other personal choices. Much the same is true, he says, for the elderly, who are far more diverse in type and style than they have ever been; it is true for such gender groups as gays, who used to adhere to a small number of behavioral types, and who have now proliferated into numerous sub-sub-groupings; it is true, he says, for everyone. Music cultures, sports cultures, tech cultures, fan cultures, online cultures, a panoply of long- and short-lived ways of thinking and living are all continually springing into being.

McCracken is right. Numerous areas of cultural activity that until recently had gatekeeper-controlled "mainstreams"--popular music, TV, fashion, reading, etc.--have split into a sometimes bewildering variety of subgenres. In his 1997 work, *Plenitude*, McCracken argues that the cultural "fecundity" and "speciation" he is observing is made possible by capitalism. A culture rich in choices is both anti-conformist and liberationist, because it is rich in personal possibilities. People can remake themselves, and experiment with their self-images. "Capitalism has endured, enabled, perhaps provoked the speciation we see around us....It doesn't care what it does. It doesn't care what we do." Capitalism, he writes, "is nothing if not transformational." McCracken and Jardine are actually telling the same story, though each is describing a different stage of its development. His focus on the present transformational possibilities of capitalism is not only very much related to what Jardine is getting at in her own discussion of Renaissance "acquisitiveness" and "consumerism," it is in fact the end result (so far) of a cultural process that first appears with the Renaissance.

Not only was expanding material well-being a major subject of the art of both 15th- and 16th-century Italy, Jardine argues, it was an essential component of the new Renaissance mentality behind that art. Of course, the growing well-being of the Renaissance is limited to a few classes in a highly stratified world, and is expressing itself in luxuries. But the point is the same: What made the imagery important to those who originally commissioned and displayed it was not only the revolutionary artistry that was developing, but that, ultimately, that imagery was a reflection and a celebration of their new material world, their new worldly interests, and their emerging, individualized selves.

Indeed, an essential point about Renaissance art is that after centuries in which visual imagery was devoted to religious themes in styles and forms specifically dictated by the Church (at the Second Council of Nicaea in the eighth century), art turns its attention to the secular world and begins to invent its own terms. Individual artists begin to be celebrated, and their work demanded. As the German art scholar Hans Belting has put it, this shift is actually the beginning of art as we understand the idea. And that art, which is so greatly admired, would not have existed without the "consumerism," which is so greatly disparaged.

This was not a unique historical coincidence. Though the world of artistic culture exists today on its own terms, with its own tradition and an established discourse that is often very far removed from--and opposed to--material concerns, its anti-material mystification is a modern conceit.

Commercialization and, worse, "commodification" are considered by the contemporary cultural establishment to be the mortal enemies of art, and the antithesis of its spirit. But the fact is that art's great historic opportunities have frequently arisen from intensely commercialized periods, and have often been accompanied--if not set in motion--by periods of explosive acquisitiveness. There is an inescapable connection between the rise of an acquisitive public and the expansion of an audience interested in expressive art, and it is out of that nexus that the recognition of the expressive creator as a visionary artist has developed.

THE CONVERGENCE OF commerce, wealth, and cultural achievement can also be observed in the famous case of 17th-century Holland. The Dutch of that period were extremely innovative shipbuilders, dyers, and farmers, as well as innovative traders, and the result was that their society became immensely rich. What had once been items of luxury, noted Michael North last year in *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age*, became everyday goods.

Market forces and the innovation they unleashed, argues North, a German economic historian, had a huge impact on that society's art. For one thing, the traditional relationship between artists and patrons was broken: Instead, "paintings were marketable goods which competed for the attention of the buyer." Art dealers appeared, buying painters' works and commissioning them to do more. In addition, the Dutch invention of tonal painting drove down

the costs of producing art and made paintings available to an ever greater proportion of a suddenly art-hungry public.

"[F]or the first time in European history," writes North, "the middle classes also demanded works of art." Whereas the Dutch nobility had often commissioned religious images and allegorical paintings, the recently wealthy middle class had an interest in secular subjects, including themselves, their possessions, their buildings, and the painterly transformation of their familiar landscapes (a secular shift further encouraged by Calvinist iconoclasm). Art spread throughout Dutch society; even peasants had hanging on their walls the work of painters whom we regard today as Dutch Masters.

This same phenomenon played out yet again in 18th-century England, the time and place where our current cultural world was built. Augustan England saw a revolution in the arts. Cultural activity, until that time, had been centered in Europe's aristocratic courts, and shaped by contemplative aristocratic taste. Few artists enjoyed much status, and they performed whatever creative work was commissioned by their noble patrons.

Accelerating trade and industrialization in Britain, however, created a large middle class with increasing money and leisure, and that class was to reorder the cultural world entirely. The arts, especially literature, flourished. The influence of the nobility was annihilated; culture moved from the court to the city, and the system of imitative fine arts as we still know them was developed. Artists, for their part, enjoyed enormously enhanced social status and regard. If the age of art begins with the Renaissance, the age of the artist, as Hans Belting has noted, begins with the Enlightenment.

In the meantime, "[t]here was a consumer boom in England in the eighteenth century," according to the Cambridge economic historian Neil McKendrick, a boom that "reached revolutionary proportions." It was, McKendrick wrote in 1982, "a convulsion of getting and spending" that had never been seen before. "Luxuries" became "decencies"; "decencies" became "necessities"; necessities "underwent a dramatic metamorphosis in style, variety and availability." Goods were everywhere available in unprecedented profusion, and the rising middle class used them not only for convenience and comfort, but to recreate themselves socially and culturally.

Because of the social conditions of the period, a great deal of middle-class energy originally went into emulating the aristocracy by dressing and otherwise attempting to live like them. But inevitably, the middle classes soon became interested in the world they themselves were creating and the types of persons they were becoming. One major result was the explosion of fiction reading and the rise of the English novel. Literature played the same role for industrialization's middle classes that painting had played for the patrons of secular Renaissance art and the Dutch burghers: the aesthetic reflection of a changed people in a changed world.

Interestingly, Neil McKendrick's description of the commercialization of 18th-century society parallels Grant McCracken's description of the present. "[U]nabashed by any sense of plenitude in Nature," McKendrick writes of the 18th century, "men deliberately sought to create new and improved species and exciting novelties with which to delight the eye, to exhibit one's taste and to assert one's wealth."

In Augustan England such speciation was descriptive of the exploding world of goods. But the use to which people have put such goods in two centuries of social, political, and cultural development has been a key factor in allowing McCracken to apply the very same metaphor to society itself. McKendrick's Enlightenment is an urban place in which people draw on the material world to break the bonds of class and status; McCracken's late 20th century, in which wealth is far more widely disseminated, is an individualized place where people draw on their material surroundings to create and recreate aspects of themselves at will.

EVERYBODY AGREES THAT "consumerism" is a modern curse, perhaps *the* modern curse. Clergymen, intellectuals, social critics, environmentalists, artists, politicians, journalists, and pop ascetics of every kind describe it as a vulgar, advertising-driven accumulation of unnecessary junk, and a build-up of debilitating debt. Marxists have explained it in terms of such concepts as "commodity fetishism," "symbolic capital," and, in a still-vital concept formulated by the German Marxist Frankfurt School, "false needs" insinuated by a conspiratorial capitalism. Meaningful lives, the whole world agrees, lie in simple things that cannot be purchased: love, nature, family, and the contemplation of eternal spiritual values.

It is obviously true that happiness lies in such essential concerns, just as it is obvious that in many individual cases, "consumerism" really is little more than a crass reflex often resulting in crippling personal debt. So why is it that, while everybody expresses the heartiest contempt for consumerist behavior, everybody in the world who can do so indulges in it, including most of its critics? There is one complicating factor in the universal condemnation of acquisitiveness: personal liberty, and the opportunity to employ the material world as a tool for self-expression. What we regard as "consumerist" behavior does not begin with industrialization and the manufacture of cheap, ready-made goods; it can be traced to antiquity. One revealing way to trace its past is through the proclamation through history of so-called sumptuary laws that attempted to control acquisitiveness.

These laws expressly limited the quality of things--clothing, gems, and the like--that any given individual was allowed to own or display. The purpose of such laws was not spiritual; they were not intended to turn anyone's attention to family or nature. Rather, the laws' purpose was to maintain the political and social status quo. These

laws preserved despotic distinctions politically by limiting the material display to the hereditary upper classes (or to such professional classes as doctors or professors), and they underscored the effect of poverty psychologically by preventing anyone from expressing their individuality except in ways allowed by tradition. Urban classes either wore or owned what they were supposed to, or faced punishment. (Pre-industrial rural classes, though they are often seen through a filter of nostalgia for "simplicity," owned almost nothing, and lived narrow lives marked by ignorance, hunger, and destitution.)

Those who enacted sumptuary laws understood very well the relationship between material goods and individual power. So, more recently, did the administrators of a failing Soviet Union, who might have saved themselves for at least a little longer had they figured out (as the Chinese have) how to supply their citizens with such things as jeans and rock music.

That is the relationship that Jardine, McCracken, and McKendrick (among other scholars) are, in their respective ways, addressing: The translation of material wealth into an assertion of individualism. Their subject is people who are drawing (or have drawn) on their material context to recreate themselves and even, in McCracken's work, to experiment with their identities, either validating or escaping external, imposed, or inherited categories of class, nationality, or geography (the very sorts of categories in which the academic left--and such cultural nationalists as those of France and Canada--have been seeking to trap culture).

At a mundane level, one might argue that the more worldly goods (and services) to choose among, the less worldly constraint. But it is not the goods themselves that matter; what counts is the potential for making self-defining choices, an intellectual act. That is the engine driving culture under capitalism. The florescence of cultural artifacts that accompanies periods of intense acquisition is part of the same process of individuation.

Even some cultural-studies academics have begun to recognize consumerism as a route to empowerment. *The New York Times* recently reported that such scholars as Deidre Lynch, of State University of New York at Buffalo, are now arguing that 18th- and 19th-century stores allowed women to emerge into public, where, merely by imagining they owned the goods they saw, they were "transported into new identities." But because such intellectuals think commerce is about conflict and oppression, these scholars maintain that women browsers somehow taught store clerks lessons in class by taunting them with possible purchases, and even that they fortified class divisions by "cheapening" the clothes they tried on.

Anti-sumptuary Marxists regard even this analysis as going too far, because it grants consumers "creativity," "autonomy," "rebelliousness," and even "authority." According to British sociologist Don Slater, whose work is quoted in the *Times*, consumers have none of these characteristics. Such analysis reflects "the logic of the consumer society it seeks to analyze." The new theories, complains Slater, assume that consumers are rational and autonomous creatures who, in the *Times's* paraphrase, acquire what they want and want what they acquire. Slater and his fellow critics think they know otherwise.

Sociologist Slater is, of course, speaking the language of Frankfurt School Marxism; the *Times* cites his belief that consumers do not know "real needs" from "false needs," a classic formulation. The century's Western Marxists, for all their own speculation of theorists, have never been able to come to grips with consumerism. They have advanced a series of theories that attempt to account for acquisitiveness and its cultural ramifications by denying individual preference, and as a result have blundered into forms of intellectual occultism: corporate mesmerism, class conspiracism, consumer robotism, etc.

All of this has grown out of the historical materialist theories advanced by Marx himself, which have shaped the intellectual understanding of the material world's effects on cultural activity. In 1846, Marx and Engels asserted that a society's cultural "superstructure" was dependent on its economic "base" (though many current thinkers "informed by Marx" regard that formulation as "vulgar"). The culture produced by those in material control of society was designed, according to the Marxist tradition, to maintain the ruling ideology. Culture was a tool of control and oppression.

THE RISE OF a materialist counter-vision that sees the opportunity for individual liberation in the nexus of culture and commerce is not so much a challenge to the left's long-dominant analysis as it is a reappropriation of the subject. The first such voices were raised centuries ago.

"All the arts seem to have been companions, if not the produce, of successful commerce," wrote the English music historian Charles Burney in 1776, "and they will, in general, be found to have pursued the same course...that is, like commerce, they will be found, upon enquiry, to have appeared first in Italy, then in the Hanseatic towns, next in the Netherlands."

Burney's judgement reflected a view widely held during the Enlightenment: Liberty encourages commerce, while commerce encourages culture. The writers of the Scottish Enlightenment were particularly drawn to the connection as they saw it played out in the Italian Renaissance. John Miller of Glasgow explored the connection between Florence's commerce and that city's leading cultural role. Adam Ferguson concurred, writing that "the progress of fine arts has generally made a part in the history of prosperous nations." Adam Smith himself intended to write a book on the matter, as historian Peter Burke notes in a brief discussion of the Scots. Smith never got around to it,

but part three of The Wealth of Nations does include an aside on markets and art. (The foremost American voice on the matter was Tom Paine, whose concern was with commerce as a civilizing force.)

The most obvious objection to the direct relationship of liberty, commerce, and culture was noted by art historian Herbert Weisinger in a 1950 review of the Scots' work (in which he mistakes these Scots, of all people, for proto-Marxists). The problem is that the Renaissance makes for a poor case in point; many Renaissance city-states were actually petty despotisms. Philosopher David Hume and historian Edward Gibbon, among others, noted even at the time that art has also been a successful tool for tyranny.

But the English and Scottish cultural materialists celebrated the Renaissance not because they thought it to be a blossoming of freedom; as Weisinger notes, they were committed to the idea of progress, and the Renaissance was an advance over the Medieval period from any point of view. As it turns out, the Scots' notions of commerce, liberty, and culture have been borne out within the very framework of historical development to which they were committed; they would likely have read the *Journals*'s manifesto of culture with no surprise.

The Scots were looking backward to make their cultural case; in fact, they actually had a much better example available to them to prove that culture expresses liberty, though they couldn't see that example because they were a part of it. At the very historical moment they were advancing their thesis, 18th-century commercialization was driving a sweeping transformation of the very idea of culture, and liberating not only the cultural audience, but the artist, too.

JOHN BREWER'S 1997 work, The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century, is a detailed account of how a new cultural world was built in the midst of increasing plenty. A former Harvard professor of history and literature who now teaches in Florence, Brewer is an old London Enlightenment hand who well understands the relationship between ideas and the material context in which they grow. His 1982 essay on "Commercialization and Politics" examines the changes in the period's political consciousness that emerged from the increasing commercialization of social activities, and demonstrates how those changes translated into growing demands for liberty (particularly as applied to the John Wilkes affair).

In *Pleasures*, Brewer is again concerned with commercialization, this time with its shaping of art culture. His book is a panorama of the period's fine arts, and the story he tells is of culture's entry into the urban marketplace. There, subject to greed, exploitation, tastelessness, and professionalization, as well as to the interaction of innovative creators and the demands of an ever-more interested and knowledgeable audience, cultural forms began to flourish in unprecedented ways.

His account of the growth of London's literary culture is worth pausing over. At the outset of the period, writing was largely a dilettante's pastime. So was reading, which was done mostly for edification, and rarely with the ludic, emotional involvement that was soon to emerge. Noblemen often wrote for their own amusement. (Horace Walpole, creator of the gothic novel, printed his own books in his basement.) However, theirs was a "liberal" calling, and it was beneath their station to accept money. "Writing for money," notes Brewer, "not only reduced authorship to a mechanical trade but subverted the value of the work." Literature for pay was venal.

As cultural activity intensified in Augustan London, however, there was a good deal of money to be made at writing, though not by writers. Most of the money went into the pockets of bookseller-publishers, who were anxious to meet the increasing demands of a literate public in the throes of revolutionary consumerism, and in the midst of a fiction-reading frenzy that owed much to the liberating opportunities of increasing wealth. These pioneering commercial publishers were not, in the main, men who loved books, as the current book trade likes to imagine them; they were out for a profit. Their ruthless treatment of writers was often appalling; they set writers to work in the literary sweatshops of Grub Street, paying them as little as possible while retaining publishing rights for as long as possible.

Brewer identifies two factors that established the professional author familiar today. The first was legal: Writers were able to establish property rights to the work they were creating. The second was intellectual, and has had far-reaching consequences. It was the assertion of creative genius.

The leading voice on behalf of writerly genius was author and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (for artists, the case was best made by William Blake). Johnson's best-remembered quote about writing is that "No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," a remark that is believed today to express literary cynicism. In fact, Johnson's powerful arguments on behalf of writers as wielders of creative genius were made in defense of writers as money-making professionals.

Eighteenth-century aristocratic taste dismissed the work of the new literary marketplace as pandering, manufactured trash. Johnson answered this position definitively by asserting originality, and praising those writers who "produce new ideas...[and] gratify the imagination with any uncommon train of images or contexture of events." Literature was not a disinterested effort to uncover "natural" truths by persons of "taste," as the aristocrats held; it was a matter of individual ingenuity. Such writers deserved to be paid, and to be respected as well. "[T]he association of creative genius with originality had never been made so forcefully," writes Brewer. Johnson and his allies won their debate.

It was the most important turning point in the history of modern letters. Creative genius was established as a

cultural fact in defense of professionalization, just as literature was being thoroughly commercialized. The effect, of course, was to set writers free. Their social status (along with that of other artists), soared; the legitimacy of their creative vision was validated. Armed with law and status, artists could present their work in a market and hope to attract a like-minded audience.

One result was the flowering of English literature. Similar changes in the perception of creative artistry throughout Europe set the stage for a succession of Western artist-centered movements--literary, visual, musical, etc.--that still continues.

Another consequence, however, was the conviction developed by writers and artists in the course of the 19th century that they themselves constituted a kind of aristocracy--a nobility of the spirit--and that they too were above a marketplace that, by its nature, manufactured trash and sullied their own imaginative creativity. The role of the visionary artist, though the very concept emerged from the marketplace, was to become not merely mystified, but sacralized. The achievements of the creative imagination, past as well as present, were set in a place so rarified that the material world was nowhere in sight. Soon, men could stand before a centuries-old picture of a recumbent nude woman in a salacious pose, and see in it harmonious amour, Dionysiac triumph, or the themes of Latin poetry expressed in symbols.

IN 1837, A melancholy young poet gathered his verses, his sketches for yet-unwritten novels, and the notes for a creative life that would go un-lived, and set fire to it all. His Romantic spirit was emerging from a crisis of the soul, and the fire he lit was meant as a cleansing. For days on end, he later wrote to his father, "I had been unable to think." The poetry he was destroying was filled with "broad and shapeless expressions of unnatural feeling." In his struggle with art, "Everything grew vague, and all that is vague lacks boundaries." Art for him was now at an end. He resolved to take up philosophy, where he could find "our mental nature to be just as determined, concrete, and firmly established as our physical."

Too bad he didn't like his verses more. The sorrowful young poet was Karl Marx, and the existence of a few more throbbing Romantic German poems--had he continued writing them--would have been a very small price to pay in exchange for the collectivist grotesque of the 20th century. That poet's search for "boundaries"--the antithesis of the variation that has proceeded from the market--is an effort worth pondering.

So is the fact that the very last believers in Marx's principles to have any influence are those concerned with culture. The last question that will be asked by the last Marxist will not be about modes of production or the proletariat; it will be about why people do any of the things they do. Why do they buy what they buy? Watch what they watch? Read what they read? Marxists have arrived at many answers to these questions, an indication that even they seem to know that all of them have been wrong.

Their answers, in their very profusion, make for a revealing chorus: Because the ruling bourgeoisie propagandized them, goes one answer. Because they have been forced to have "false needs," goes another. Because they've been hegemonized, goes a third. Because of the work of the consciousness industry, goes one more. The Marxist tradition has been so frustrated by history's refusals that it has developed an even greater contempt for its "masses" than it ever had for the demon bourgeoisie.

One answer of interest has recently come from the Marxist-influenced "Birmingham School" of cultural studies in England. It is almost the last possible Marxist answer: People watch what they watch, this school has concluded, because they take pleasure in the act. What pleasure? The pleasure, it unfortunately turns out, of "subversion." The viewing audience enjoys substituting its own subversive meanings for the intended meanings of corporate creators. Culture remains oppression in this school, but personal pleasure, and even a contorted version of personal choice, have at least gotten in the schoolhouse door. A little more homework, perhaps, and the scholars will arrive at the answer which the audience itself found long ago.

That answer is that people are enthusiastic participants in marketplace culture because, rather than being victimized and oppressed by it, they find in it opportunities for the liberation and satisfaction of their senses and their intellect: It is a place of potential fulfillment. What some people do with their opportunities may be shallow; what others do may be creatively expressive. Not everyone succeeds: Each person, in such a culture, is always balancing the risks that stem from his or her decisions against the personal satisfactions they hope for. In a culture shaped by liberty, people do the things they do for the very reason the 18th-century Scottish thinkers understood: because they are free to express their individuality.

We still have a handful of Karl Marx's poems. In one that he dedicated to his fiancée, he wrote turbulently that, "Ich stürme ohne Rast." I storm without cease. A truer line was never written by any better poet. But even his tempest has passed at last, and one more Prospero must drown his book.

Charles Paul Freund is a REASON senior editor.