

Book Banning

Ouds, Oeuvres, and Oppressors

by Donald Friedman

The oud is a lute-like instrument that, according to legend, was invented by the sixth grandson of Adam. Its music is part of the cultures of civilizations both ancient and modern (an oud player from Albuquerque has been nominated for a Grammy). On May 1, 2008, the *New York Times* reported that Iraqi musicians who play its fabled strings must do so in hiding or risk death—not to mention the destruction of their instruments—by Muslim fundamentalists. I mention this, rather than the burning of Harry Potter books by Christian fundamentalists last year in parts of the U.S., or the prohibition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* by any number of American school systems, because the banning and burning of books is really not about suppressing books, but ideas. It is about trying to crush and control the creative spirit in whatever form it may manifest itself. Whether expressed in story, poem, or painting, in music or dance, it is artistic freedom that's at issue.

My book *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers* tries to make the point that artistic disciplines are not sharply divided. Paintings tell stories—and as writer-artist-wood craftsman Patricia Highsmith pointed out, so do music and dance. Stories and poetry give us images, and words not only have shape—after all, letters were pictures first—but are musical in their rhymes and rhythms.

The subjects of the book are hundreds of great writers who are also artists—and who happen to be composers, musicians, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and other professionals, besides. They are very creative people who move from one form of expression to another. For example, poet Odysseus Elytis, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1979, studied law and worked in business. When Greece fell under a military dictatorship in 1967, and during the years of censorship that followed, Elytis began to express himself in images, creating collages like the one reproduced here.

D. H. Lawrence, whose *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was famously banned, couldn't escape the censor with his painting either. Thirteen of his works were seized by police from London's Warren Gallery in 1929 and the books were dragged off to court to be tried as obscene, to be burned on conviction. Lawrence saved them by agreeing never to show them in England again. Now they're in Taos, New Mexico, and a detail from one, reproduced in *The Writer's Brush*, appears opposite.

Books have been banned and burned since there were books. (It was a very successful way to control ideas before there was a printing press.) For centuries,



only certain paintings depicting approved subjects were allowed. When music had to be composed under church rules, it could only be for voices since instruments weren't allowed, and even certain chords were taboo: a four-voice chord that was a diminished seventh, for instance, was forbidden as satanic. Fourteenth-century England instituted bans on Irish piping and arrested pipers as a means of cultural suppression.

Dances are under seemingly constant censorship. Our contemporary thoughts run to the high school students in *Footloose*, but consider that the waltz was editorialized in the *London Times* in 1816 as "...an obscene display... only suitable for prostitutes and adulteresses." For the first time, a man and woman danced as a couple and not as part of a group—the man with his arm around the woman. Irish step dancing, driven into secrecy by British penal laws, was then modified by church censors to require stiff arms. Priests saw arm movements as provocative and demonstrating insufficient restraint.

Recently, Salman Rushdie spoke at an International PEN celebration in New York. Mr. Rushdie's award-winning novel *The Satanic Verses* was banned in India, burned in the UK, and inspired Iranian officials to issue a fatwa calling on the world's Muslims to murder him. He has so far escaped execution, although his Italian and Japanese translators were both stabbed, the latter fatally. Mr. Rushdie, who I'm told is also an artist, informed the audience that there are thirty-nine Chinese writers imprisoned for expressing views the Chinese government doesn't like, and PEN is trying to free them before the Olympic Games. Gao Xingjian, the first Chinese writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 2000), and another subject of *The Writer's Brush*, served six years of hard labor during the Cultural Revolution in a reeducation camp where he was forced to destroy a suitcase full of his manuscripts to avoid recriminations.

For Teachers

Introduce your students to the ancient concept of *ekphrasis* by having them capture the essence of a work of art and re-present it, in their own way, in a different medium. They might, for example, render in pencil or paint the images in a poem or piece of prose, write out the text they discern in a painting, the story in a dance, or express the colors or shape of a piece of music in word or image. They will see how each discipline aspires to be another. The idea is to use one form of expression as a means of entering into a work of art that was created in a different form—as a way of deepening the experience and, not least, making it their own.



He turned to painting in ink on rice paper as a means of “. . . returning to the artist’s instinct; returning to feeling; returning to life. . . .” One of those paintings is reproduced right.

The problem with the way we often talk about censorship is the use of what is called the passive voice—that is, we speak as though books and paintings are burned, or music forbidden, without emphasizing that it is *people* who do it. Among the more notorious are Thomas Bowdler, a rich nobody who became a vocabulary word (*bowdlerize*: to prudishly censor) by editing Shakespeare into a version suitable for the whole family; and Anthony Comstock, a church-supported zealot who was appointed a special postal agent, given a gun, authorized to seize our mail and to arrest distributors as he saw fit, and whose record of burning 160 tons of books and nearly four million pictures still stands. Comstock’s original slogan was “morals, not art and literature,” although he expanded his reach to science, burning medical texts along with Shaw, Hemingway, and Dos Passos, and his federal anti-obscenity legislation (enacted in 1873 and still in effect today) barred physicians from dispensing birth control information to women in medical need until 1936, when the courts declared that part of the law unconstitutional.

In 1999, it took a federal judge to stop New York’s mayor Rudy Giuliani from illegally cutting off funding to the Brooklyn Museum of Art because he found a collage offensive. “There is no federal constitutional issue more grave than the effort by government officials to censor works of expression and to threaten the vitality of a major cultural institution as punishment for failing to abide by governmental demands for orthodoxy,” declared the court. In 2002, Honolulu banned a painting from a public exhibition since it showed a nude woman on a cross.

When writers and artists and musicians are imprisoned, or censored or suppressed, it is not just they who suffer from their lack of expression—it is all of us as well. We are deprived of their stories, poetry, music, and art. But it is good to remember Comstock and the lesson that freedom-suppressors are rarely satisfied with the arts, but want to stop scientific and medical inquiry as well. And suppression of ideas is often just the start: “Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings,” wrote the prescient German Jew Heinrich Heine in 1821. His books were burned along with tens of thousands of others by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s as they were preparing their death camp ovens.



The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers
by Donald Friedman

In *The Writer's Brush*, author Donald Friedman has gathered 400 paintings, drawings, and sculptures by more than 200 of the world's most famous writers, including 13 Nobel laureates.

Whether viewing the beautiful landscapes that Hermann Hesse credited with saving his life, or the cancan dancers secretly drawn by Joseph Conrad, readers of *The Writer's Brush* will gain new insights into the lives and minds of their favorite writers and the nature of the creative process itself.

Accompanying the artwork are fascinating biographies that provide little-known details of the writers' lives in the visual arts, bringing together for the first time both worlds of these vastly talented individuals. *The Writer's Brush* is also an essential reference work, with alphabetical and chronological listings of its subjects and an extensive bibliography, completing this definitive work of the writer-artist.

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How do governmental and religious thugs gain their authority over us? All too often it's because we give it to them. We yield control to people whose self-righteousness hides a boundless cruelty, an impulse to destroy that drives them into religions and governments that they hope will protect them from themselves (but too often fail). We do this out of fear. We are afraid of forces outside ourselves and of feelings within. Most of all, we are afraid to have to think things through for ourselves. We expect someone to tell us what literature is, what art is, and who's entitled to make it.

But as the great art historian E. H. Gombrich opens with in *The Story of Art*: "There is no such thing as 'Art.' There are only artists." Who are these artists—the painters and poets, dancers and storytellers, musicians and actors? Well, they could be you and me just as easily as Jack Kerouac, Patti Smith, Charlotte Brontë, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Conrad, Amiri Baraka, or any of the other 270 writers in *The Writer's Brush*. To paraphrase poet-artist-photographer Allen Ginsberg (whose great poem "Howl" was suppressed until freed by a federal court): Art isn't art really. Art begins by messing around.

Victor Hugo understood that. The author of *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* would take his morning coffee grounds, dump them on a paper, throw in some fireplace ash, and draw in it with a matchstick. (See the Hugo work above.) Russia's greatest novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and the country's most revered poet, Alexander Pushkin, drew all over their manuscripts. (See two pages from Dostoyevsky's *Devils* right.)

Everyone should make art, if only, as Kurt Vonnegut said, "because it's been known to make a soul grow." So tell a story, make up a song, glue some junk together. Play with paint, do your own dance (and be sure to move your arms), and doodle on everything. Have fun. And be careful who you put in charge. ■



About the Writer

DONALD FRIEDMAN is the author of the widely acclaimed *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers*, which the American Library Association's Booklist in its starred review called "a grand feat of research and interpretation," and the New York Times described as "a subversive jewel of an idea, sparkling audaciously on every page." He had a successful career as a trial lawyer before publishing his award-winning first novel, *The Hand Before the Eye*.