

## Reader, when I hear the words ‘reverence for Art’, I reach for my matchbox



Every believing Christian must be tempted, at times, to spit on her hands, hoist the black flag, and defend the legacy of Fra Girolamo Savonarola. I reached that point myself last week when Just Stop Oil campaigners superglued themselves to the frame of Constable’s *The Hay Wain* in the National Gallery. The fury of their critics was unquenchable. Their reasoning – given that *The Hay Wain* was unharmed – was incoherent. One commentator called for the protesters to be maimed, adding that one ought to show “reverence for Art”. It would make anyone feel savonarolan. Reader, when I hear the words “reverence for Art”, I reach for my matchbox.

*Tendresse* for Girolamo S. – and his “bonfire of the vanities” – isn’t particularly fashionable. Historically, Savonarola was seen as a heroic reformer, proto-democrat, even a saint. Nowadays, mention of the diminutive Dominican prompts alarm rather than approbation: he’s conceived, instead, as an anti-human demagogue, somewhere between Islamic State and Mark Francois.

I’m not sure why. Savonarola’s reliance on spiritual force – instead of the more reliable physical sort – was mocked by Machiavelli. But his call for moral reform won the admiration of Italy’s leading humanists. Michelangelo asked him for advice; Pico della Mirandola died in his arms; Botticelli, secular painter supreme, fed masterpieces to the “bonfire” on the strength of his preaching. For a few short years, all Florence hung on the little friar’s words. A spark of the Holy Spirit set a great, worldly city ablaze.

His idea of moral reform was admittedly demanding; but not more demanding than the Gospel. More deeply felt, I think, is the unease the “bonfire” provokes in us; the wilful destruction of beautiful things prompts shuddering horror, not admiration. This response isn’t entirely inborn. The sinologist Simon Leys once commented that Maoist China’s wholesale destruction of the past appalled Westerners far more than it did the Chinese. They were accustomed to it. Emperors would wipe the slate clean every few centuries.

Western paranoia over posterity has shallower roots. Enlightenment

thinkers, despairing of Christianity, found in easels and oil paint an ersatz eternity. Needled by an awareness of how much human knowledge was lost forever, luminaries fixated on the monumental, self-consciously memorialising their slightest gestures.

Those transcendental trappings are long-decayed. But the glamour of eternity lingers. We catch a glimpse of it in superstitious muttering over superglue. We catch another in theories of “co-creation” and “the sacramental imagination”, where art participates in God’s ongoing work of creation and redemption; means of sanctification, instruments of grace.

A reluctance to take a hard look at art – to gloss dross with platitudes or retreat to the constrictive security of the canonical – promotes the whole field into irrelevance, choked by a reverence too profound for thought. That’s why Nietzsche celebrated when he heard the Paris communards had torched the Louvre: those who worship art cannot create it.

Savonarola’s “bonfire” wasn’t fuelled by a dim view of culture but by an accurate one. The problem with the “sacramental imagination” is that the imagination isn’t a sacrament, however we cut it: art is human, not divine. Art is special only as human beings are special; clever as humans are clever; funny and charming and beautiful and holy only as far as human beings are. Which is to say: sometimes.

Working out when “sometimes” is – knowing good from evil – takes something subtler and more demanding than “objective standards of beauty”. It demands a capacity for analysis and differentiation; to make distinctions, to judge and so to understand. It requires taste. To develop that capacity – that taste – requires becoming virtuous. It’s what Catholic morality is all about. It’s what Savonarola was trying to induce when he torched the Botticellis. And it’s what the protesters, in their own confused, post-Christian way, attempted to encourage with their superglue stunt. A humanist insight worthy of the renaissance: it’s people who matter, not their creations – however beautiful.

Sancte Savonarola – you might say – *Ora pro nobis*.

