



23rd January 2011

## In Memoriam: Thomas Molnar (1921 - 2010)

The Catholic philosopher and historian Thomas Molnar died on July 20th 2010. The author of more than thirty books and a survivor of Dachau who then witnessed the communist takeover of Hungary, Dr Molnar was a critic of all “transformative” ideological philosophies of the left or the right. In 1950 he earned a Ph.D. in political philosophy from Columbia University, New York. In 1967 he warned against technological hubris in his book “Utopia: The Perennial Heresy” suggesting that the public forgets:

“...man cannot step out of the human condition and that no ‘universal mind’ is now being manufactured simply because science has permitted the building of nuclear bombs, spaceships and electronic computers.”

He was, with the painter [Frank Mason](#) and the cultural historian Arcadi Nebolsine, a force in a tributary/precursor organisation (The International Society for the Preservation of Art, and its Committee to Save the Sistine Ceiling) which joined forces with [ArtWatch International](#) when it was founded in 1992. In 1990 he wrote a manifesto on art restoration, which we publish below.

His friend **Arcadi Nebolsine** contributes this note:

### Concerning Professor Thomas Molnar in memoriam:

“I lament an old friend and a great religious philosopher and elegant author of many works. I always admired his brilliance and his humor. There was something 18th century about it since he was always an effective foe of the French Revolution and other succeeding revolutions and their consequences 20th century modernism and ‘Americanism’ (not America!).

A strong proponent of Tradition, he condemned



the Vatican II excesses and pseudo-seriousness and sheer silliness. He was the best of Mittel-Europa, very much continental and an inveterate foe of Communism. He lent distinction to William Buckley's [National Review](#). His opposition to Modernism extended to the arts and architecture – for instance in the sadly failed attempts to save Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.” [Arcadi Nebolsine.]

### Thomas Molnar – A Manifesto: Restoration in Art

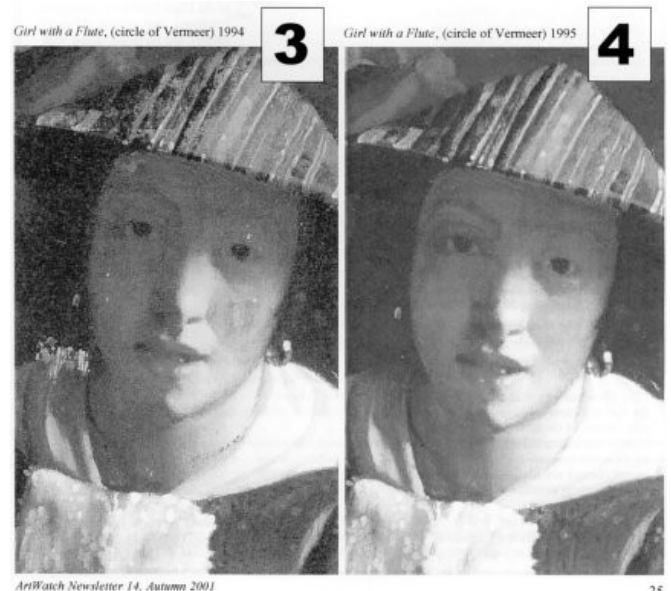
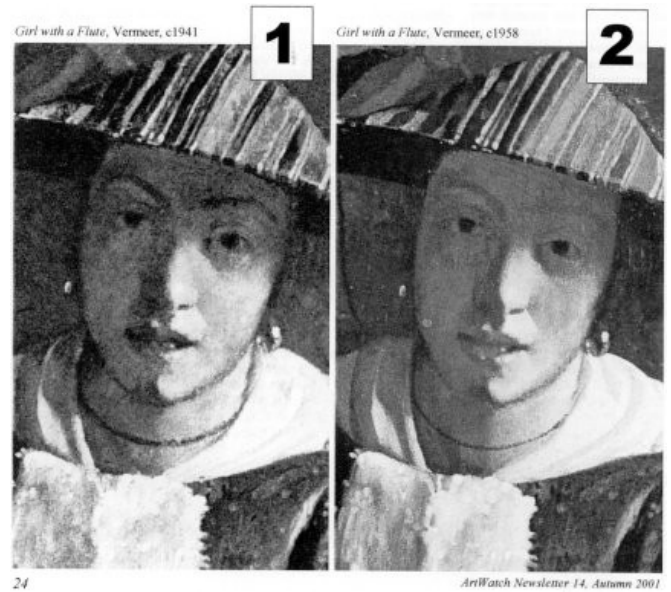
“In an age when all certitudes are questioned, and Truth and the Good are on the defensive, Beauty still rallies the largest number of enthusiasts. The onslaughts against it – tasteless monuments, concoctions in cement and metal in our parks, puzzles on museum and gallery walls – are violently resented by lovers of art. The latter have also turned their attention to the no-less important area of art restoration where abuses have increased in the past decades.

“We are aware now that the art of the past is vulnerable: to the work of the removal of layers on paintings, the retouching, the search for alleged original lines and colours. Although armed with expertise and good intentions, many restorers are tempted to play demiurge, to ‘know better’ than the work’s creator. The trouble is that misapplied zeal carries them away, they become competitors against the artist whose work they ought to serve.

“A cultural misunderstanding should be dispelled: the Sistine Chapel or Leonardo’s Last Supper are not only the works themselves as localized and dated, they have had a life of their own during the half-a-millennium since their creation. The ‘search for the original’ may be an ill-conceived enterprise in view of the fact that the artist must have foreseen the effects of time and would not today wish to return to the illud tempus, to what his work appeared when he finally put down the brush or the chisel.

“We must think twice about the branch of art called restoration, and resist the modern urge to erase time – in these cases the intervening centuries – during which the work of art has matured. No cause is served when every generation tries its hand at re-doing the masterpieces for the questionable purpose of saving them. A masterpiece today is not what it was in the original creator’s workshop. Nor should contemporary taste, marked by the puritanical penchant for geometry and poster design be so sure of itself as to rush in with the job of cleaning and retouching. Moral prudence should combine with aesthetic reverence in the task of

Above: Michelangelo's prophet Daniel from the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, before (left) and after (right) cleaning. Note the loss of folds on the drapery over the shoulder to the left, and the loss of the shadow to the right of that drapery. Below: Vermeer's Girl with a Flute. Note the loss of shading generally, through successive restorations within little more than half a century. Note too, the progressive loss and the eventual painting-out of the girl's necklace within this same period.



Click on the images above for larger versions. NOTE: zooming requires the [Adobe Flash Plug-in](#).

preservation, a more reassuring term and endeavour than restoration.”

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