

Obituary: Hilton Kramer, art critic and neoconservative

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Hilton Kramer, the well-known American art critic and founder of the neoconservative cultural journal *The New Criterion*, died last month at the age of 84.

Kramer wrote extensively about painting and sculpture, as well as literature and politics. For over 50 years, he spoke for some of the most retrograde forces in American culture. Discrediting the impact that socialism and the mass political struggles of the early 20th century had on modern art was his specialty.

Born in 1928 in Gloucester, Massachusetts into a Jewish immigrant family, Kramer later described the impact of growing up in a community of painters in this old New England fishing port. As an advanced student in the public schools, he was entitled to go on field trips to hear the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and he discovered nearby another one of cultural jewels of the Boston area, the Museum of Fine Arts.

Kramer attended Syracuse University and by 1951 had met the critic Philip Rahv at the University of Indiana and published his first piece of art criticism—a response to Harold Rosenberg’s famous essay on Jackson Pollock and Action Painting—in the journal that Rahv edited, *Partisan Review*.

Partisan Review had its origin in the 1930s, led by a group of intellectuals who broke with the Stalinist Communist Party and briefly became sympathetic to Trotskyism. Many of these figures, including Rahv, Dwight Macdonald and others, supported the Dewey Commission that investigated Stalin’s frame-up charges against Trotsky at the infamous Moscow Trials of 1936-7.

The group around *Partisan Review*, largely overlapping with the circle that came to be known as the New York Intellectuals, included such well-known figures as the philosopher Sidney Hook, the writer Mary McCarthy, literary critics Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, and the art critic Clement Greenberg.

By the time of American entry into the Second World War, many if not most of these intellectuals, reflecting the pressure of the ruling class’s preparations for war, had moved to the right. This process found its sharpest political expression in the break from Trotskyism of the faction inside the Socialist Workers Party led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham.

A decade later, by the late 1940s, the broader layer of left-wing and liberal intellectuals had for the most part made its peace with American capitalism. By the time Kramer encountered the New York Intellectuals in the early 1950s, most of them were a mainstay of official anti-Communist liberalism. *Partisan Review*

had become one of the leading cultural journals in the US, and Kramer’s publication there brought him almost instant recognition and advancement.

Twenty or more years younger than most of the New York Intellectuals, Kramer shared none of their experiences in the left of the 1930s. He later wrote in an essay on Mary McCarthy that these experiences made his older colleagues “extremely touchy, and, indeed vulnerable, to attacks from the Left.” Kramer had none of their history and no hesitation in aligning himself with the most right-wing elements.

In art criticism Kramer was an “esthete” who preferred to judge works of art exclusively by their formal accomplishments, dismissing, on the whole, what they told viewers about the artist’s understanding of life.

Kramer extolled modernism – the painting and sculpture of such masters of the early twentieth century such as Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso, Giacometti and others. These artists indeed had become a cultural standard by the 1950s, and many of their works had been purchased by American museums and by the American elite both before and after the war.

The problem was that, as Kramer himself admitted, these works were born in revolt, and not simply an artistic revolt, but in the widespread cultural turbulence that had its origins in the social tensions that gripped European society in the early years of the twentieth century.

European art both anticipated the collapse of capitalism in the First World War in 1914 and was profoundly affected by the war and its consequences, most of all by the possibility of a socialist society posed by the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The classical Marxist view of art had been largely suppressed by the time Kramer appeared on the scene, though it was a critical component of the development of the modernism that Kramer celebrated. The nature of art, as many artists and intellectuals understood in the first decades of the 20th century, is to reflect and interpret by means of its own the fullness of social life as well as nature and man’s relationship to it. Social life is not simply a series of impressions and appearances, but a deeply historical and law-driven process.

The contemporary artist exists in a world that is torn, whether he or she likes it or understands it or not, by contradictions between classes. Invariably, art will reflect this fundamental human condition. Art is the most sensitive barometer of social conditions, and by its nature will gravitate toward protest against prevailing

social conditions of war, poverty and ignorance, which are today the products of the decay of the capitalist system.

Kramer turned his back on this understanding of art. Under the double blows of the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Cold War anticommunism he and most of his generation repudiated the very idea of revolutionary art. He came to play the role of a cultural surgeon, so to speak, whose job it was to excise the impact of the Russian Revolution from the early twentieth-century Avant-garde visual art that came to be known as Modernism.

In his writings on the Russian Avant-garde, for example, and its relationship to the socialist aspirations of the Soviet working class—this “misbegotten alliance of art and politics,” as he called it—he was always handy with the lie that Stalinism was the inheritor of the Bolshevik regime and that the Stalinist suffocation of artistic freedom was foreshadowed by Lenin.

At one exhibition of Pablo Picasso’s work in 1980, Kramer took another look at *Guernica*, the artist’s great antiwar painting, created in anger in the space of two months in 1937, to commemorate the victims of the Nazi bombing of the Republican village of that name during the Spanish Civil War.

Kramer saw *Guernica* emerging “in a somewhat altered perspective” at the exhibition. The rage that powered *Guernica* “turns out to have been well established as one of the dominant sexual motifs years before either the bombing of *Guernica* or the Civil War itself loomed on the artist horizon.” *Guernica*, claimed Kramer, is “no longer quite convincing as the strictly political avowal it has traditionally been taken to be.”

No doubt there were conflicted psychological sensibilities in Picasso well before 1937—brought about by the life he lived and saw around him, which were reflected in *Guernica*. That life, though, consisted not only of his personal experiences, but was conditioned by the rise of fascism, the development of a new world war, and innumerable social struggles of the working class, however consciously these were assimilated by the artist himself.

Kramer, however, used the new assessment to diminish one of the most majestic acts of protest by an artist in the twentieth century, a unity of form and the content of “single-mindedness,” as critic John Berger has noted, whose elements all bear witness to “what at this single moment” is the painting’s female figure’s “single ability: the ability to suffer pain.” It is a masterwork of the ability of art to reveal and transform the feelings of its viewer about war.

As the chief art critic of *The New York Times* from 1965 to 1982, Kramer was hostile to much of the art that emerged after Abstract Expressionism. Writing on the “New Realists” show at New York’s Janis Galley in 1962, which launched Pop Art, he could not hint at the deeper social causes for this school’s reaction to Modernism.

As a rule, he approached the difficulties that artists worked under with a snobbish hostility. Even for artists and schools of art of which he approved, or to which he gave qualified approval (Neo-Expressionism, Julian Schnabel, even certain social realists such as Jack Beal), his observations were a one-sided parody of substantive critical analysis of art.

Kramer found an easy target in much of the artistic and cultural

criticism of the past three decades, itself produced by the decay and growing demoralization of middle class radicalism.

It should be said that none of these newer schools of criticism, from so-called Western Marxism to postmodernism to what has passed for the Academic Left in general—mounted, or was able to mount, a serious opposition to Kramer. Their own hostility to the Enlightenment, to notions of progress and rational thought, in fact created the room for Kramer and other learned reactionaries such as Allan Bloom and William Bennett to emerge in the 1980s.

Kramer was among the writers who came from the ranks of the New York Intellectuals and their descendants to support the most right wing cultural and political forces in and around the Republican Party.

In 1976 *The New York Times* published his foul “The Blacklist and the Cold War,” which defended the McCarthyite witch-hunt, attacking those artists and writers who criticized it, notably Woody Allen for his film “The Front.”

In 1982 Kramer left the *Times* to start the journal *The New Criterion*. This magazine could be relied upon to find the “cultural” justification for the social counterrevolution ushered in by the Reagan Administration in 1980, an offensive by the American bourgeoisie against the social gains the working class had made over the previous half-century.

Kramer’s service to reaction surfaced prominently in 1989 when he defended the Corcoran Gallery’s decision to cancel its exhibition of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Kramer played a central role in justifying the censorship of Mapplethorpe’s work. This in turn facilitated support for the reactionary 1990 NEA Appropriations Bill, banning support for “obscene” work.

In his last years Kramer added nothing significant to the understanding of artistic development, even to the appreciation of new form and technique. In the end, he represented one side of an impasse that characterizes the present cultural climate. In 2004 he was awarded the NEA’s Medal for the Humanities by George W. Bush, a fitting commentary on his career.



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