

Voice For Liberty in Wichita

Individual liberty, limited government, and free markets in Wichita and Kansas

Myth: Markets debase culture and art

by Guest Author on May 7, 2012

When thinking about the difference between government action and action taken by free people trading voluntarily in markets, we find that many myths abound. [Tom G. Palmer](#), who is Vice President for International Programs at the [Atlas Economic Research Foundation](#), General Director of the [Atlas Global Initiative for Free Trade, Peace, and Prosperity](#), a Senior Fellow at the [Cato Institute](#), and Director of [Cato University](#), has written an important paper that confronts these myths about markets. The fifteenth myth — Markets Debase Culture and Art — and Palmer's refutation is below. The complete series of myths and responses is at [Twenty Myths about Markets](#).

Palmer is editor of the recent book [The Morality of Capitalism](#). He will be in Overland Park and Wichita in May speaking on the moral case for capitalism. For more information and to register for these events see [The Morality of Capitalism](#). An eleven minute podcast of Palmer speaking on this topic is at [The Morality of Capitalism](#).

Myth: Markets Debase Culture and Art

Myth: Art and culture are responses to the higher elements of the human soul and, as such, cannot be bought and sold like tomatoes or shirt buttons. Leaving art to the market is like leaving religion to the market, a betrayal of the inherent dignity of art, as of religion. Moreover, as art and culture are opened more and more to competition on international markets, the result is their debasement, as traditional forms are abandoned in the pursuit of the almighty dollar or euro.

Tom G. Palmer: Most art has been and is produced for the market. Indeed, the history of art is largely the history of innovation through the market in response to new technologies, new philosophies, new tastes, and new forms of spirituality. Art, culture, and the market have been intimately connected for many centuries. Musicians charge fees for people to attend their concerts, just as vegetable mongers charge for tomatoes or tailors charge to replace buttons on suits. In fact, the creation of wider markets for music, film, and other forms of art by the creation of records, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, and now iTunes and mp3 files allows more and more people to be exposed to more and more varied art, and for artists to create more artistic experiences, to create more

hybrid forms of art, and to earn more income. Unsurprisingly, most of the art produced in any given year won't stand the test of time; that creates a false perspective on the part of those who condemn contemporary art as "trashy," in comparison to the great works of the past; what they are comparing are the best works winnowed out from hundreds of years of production to the mass of works produced in the past year. Had they included all of the works that did not stand the test of time and were not remembered, the comparison would probably look quite different.

What accounts for the survival of the best is precisely the competitive process of markets for art. Comparing the entirety of contemporary artistic production with the very best of the best from past centuries is not the only error people make when evaluating markets for art. Another error common to observers from wealthy societies who visit poor societies is the confusion of the poverty of poor societies with their cultures. When wealthy visitors see people in countries that are poor-but-growing-economically using cell phones and flipping open laptops, they complain that their visit is not as "authentic" as the last one. As people become richer through market interactions made possible by increasing liberalization or globalization, such as the introduction of cell telephony, antiglobalization activists from rich countries complain that the poor are being "robbed" of their culture. But why equate culture with poverty? The Japanese went from poverty to wealth and it would be hard to argue that they are any less Japanese as a result. In fact, their greater wealth has made possible the spread of awareness of Japanese culture around the world. In India, as incomes are rising, the fashion industry is responding by turning to traditional forms of attire, such as the sari, and adapting, updating, and applying to it aesthetic criteria of beauty and form. The very small country of Iceland has managed to maintain a high literary culture and their own theater and movie industry because per capita incomes are quite high, allowing them to dedicate their wealth to perpetuating and developing their culture.

Finally, although religious belief is not "for sale," free societies do leave religion to the same principles — equal rights and freedom of choice — as those at the foundation of the free market. Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples compete with each other for adherents and for support. Unsurprisingly, those European countries that provide official state support of churches tend to have very low church participation, whereas countries without state support of religion tend to have higher levels of church participation. The reason is not so hard to understand: churches that have to compete for membership and support have to provide services — sacramental, spiritual, and communal — to members, and that greater attention to the needs of the membership tends to create more religiosity and participation. Indeed, that's why the official established state church of Sweden lobbied to be disestablished in the year 2000; as an

unresponsive part of the state bureaucracy, the church was losing connection with its members and potential members and was, in effect, dying.

There is no contradiction between the market and art and culture. Market exchange is not the same as artistic experience or cultural enrichment, but it is a helpful vehicle for advancing both.