



SCREEN

Noble Savagery

by Herbert London

The Emerald Forest; Written by Rospo Pallenberg; Produced and Directed by John Boorman; Embassy Pictures.

The Emerald Forest was often discussed as the surprise film of the summer season. It is certainly that and perhaps more. Although Mr. Pallenberg's tribute to pristine nature suggests that yet another environmental evangelist walks the corridors of a Hollywood studio, the sheer visual beauty, exacting detail, and anthropological authenticity give this film a majesty rarely found in contemporary movies.

The plot, said to be based on a true story, is centered around the kidnapping of a young boy by an Amazonian tribe known as the Invisible People. The boy's father searches 10 years until he finds his son living and acculturated among the indigenes. In one sense, the film is a stale rehearsal of Nature striving to retain her dignity and innocence against the encroachment of Civilization. Technological advancement may be inexorable, but in this fable the ancient gods triumph. The chief of the Invisible People calls modernization "the end of the world." But where the world ends and where it begins is epiphenomenal, a condition determined by the eye of the beholder.

Nonetheless, the story is an insignificant backdrop for the Amazonian forest. Every detail of this lush forest presented in the film has the hint of verisimilitude. I watched each scene with perspiration on my brow even though I sat in an air-conditioned theater. The humidity in the Amazon montage is palpable. Each tribal ritual appears as a living page in an anthropology text.

John Boorman is a director whose films—as *Deliverance* indicates—are on the "edge," that point where norms

and convention yield to instinct and survival. In the hands of a less-skilled director, this film could have been either *Tarzan* or a *National Geographic* travelogue. Had Boorman resisted the temptation to make this a moral tale in which the life of the indigenes is apotheosized, he would have made a startlingly great film. As it is, this is a good but flawed film.

So far has pop anthropology moved in the direction of rationalizing and admiring primitive practices, that the word "primitive" has long since been relegated to desuetude. Claude Levi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz, among others, remind us that there are many ways to adjust to the demands of life. However, from a Darwinian standpoint it is obvious that primitive—I have no hesitation in employing the word—cultures cannot survive in a world dominated by advanced technology. As this film demonstrates, spears are no match for automatic weapons. One may lament the loss of these ancient communities, but lamentation won't bring them back to life.

My concern with Boorman's infatuation with primitives is less significant than my despair over the depiction of modern life. Urbanization is seen as morally bankrupt; exploitation reigns. Young women from the forest are sold into prostitution, and Indians are "civilized" with alcohol and guns. This stereotype is so pervasive in film that it is one of those "truths" rarely examined. The film might have paid more attention to ritual murder, drug-induced hallucinations, self-mutilation, and the proximity of death that characterize much of tribal life. The evolution from primitive to modern man did indeed involve the loss of innocence; it also involved a well-being tribal man never envisioned. This technological shift took mankind from a reliance on nature—its whims and fury—and gave it a Promethean control over the unpredictable life forces—a theme no longer fashionable with directors.

The Emerald Forest is a paean to another way of life; the Stone Age reappears in the adult version of *The Flintstones*. Yet as blatantly moralistic and silly as this film may be, it is gripping. We enter this cinematic jungle as in a dream, swept away by imagery of dark impulses, animal urges, and a serenity of the primordial in all its nakedness. But afterwards, in the sweet glow of city lights, we take comfort in our safe modernity, in a pleasure and security the wilderness can never provide. Even if the jungle largely disappears, it will survive as fable to entrance our children yet to be, if only in *The Emerald Forest*. ∞

Herbert London is dean of the Gallatin Division of New York University.

ART

The Sumptuous Basket

by Shehbaz H. Safrani

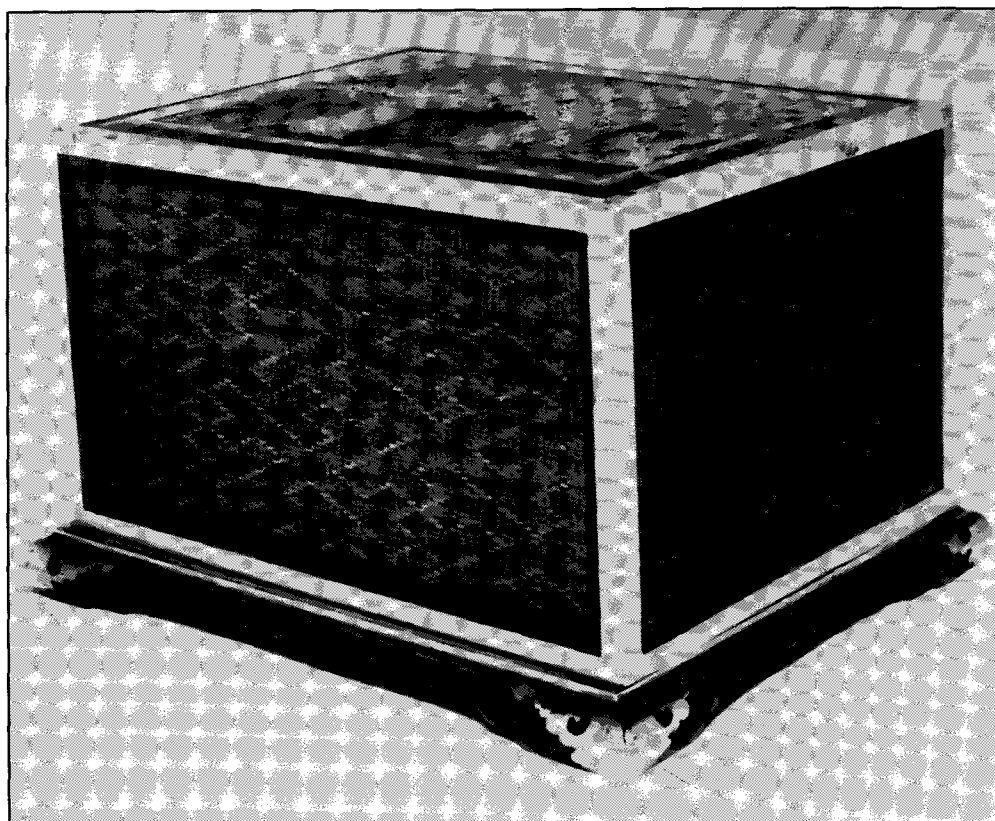
In New York City there is a room for wonder. Each year, for the past decade and more, the exhibitions held in this small room have left viewers in awe. The extraordinary quality of these shows devoted to the art of China makes a visit to China Institute worthwhile at any time of the year, but particularly during one of its exhibitions.

Founded in 1926 as an apolitical nonprofit organization, China Institute in America maintains a China House in New York City, in which is found the fabulous exhibition room. This town house is a gift of Henry R. Luce, who donated it in 1945 as a memorial to his father, Dr. Henry Winters Luce, a missionary in China. From its inception, China Institute in America has sought to promote better understanding between the American and Chinese peoples. The aim, in the words of Henry R. Luce, "is that of discovering their [Chinese] greatness,

and trying to interpret the West to the East, and the East to the West.”

Biannually, the China House features an exhibition organized by a guest curator on a specific aspect of Chinese art, complete with a fully illustrated catalogue. Virtually all China House exhibitions are distinguished: the roster of guest curators reads like a Who's Who in the world of art. No matter what the scope and ambition of a guest curator may be, the works of art are displayed in just one small room (20' x 20') with a single door. The walls contain glass cabinets that stand on a uniform dark base, waist high, putting all the artworks at eye-level but imposing limits on how much can be shown. Despite these cramped quarters, I have never felt that the art objects have been displayed in what the Victorians termed “organized clutter.” The best of all aspirations, it seems to me, has been followed at China House. Entrance is free, with inexpensive catalogues published on a shoestring budget, offering the finest of Chinese art in an extremely simple setting. In fact, no attempt has been made to create the least element of atmosphere: the tiny staff of China House does no more than change the background in the glass cases, usually a different color for each show. For smaller works of art, tiny cubes and raised areas are similarly covered with the same monochrome fabric as the interior of the glass cases. Perhaps small and large institutions, as well as universities, ought to send a scout to any one of the China House exhibitions and emulate them. Just as the artistry of the Old Masters has inspired many imitators, I see no reason why the brilliance achieved by the China House in managing and curating consistently first-rate shows should not be duplicated elsewhere in America.

Which brings us to *The Sumptuous Basket*, an exhibition of Chinese lacquer on basketry panels, shown at China House from March 30 to June 3. The idea for this show of 33 objects originated with Laurence Sickman, Director Emeritus of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas. James C. Y. Watt, Curator of Asiatic Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was the guest curator. Most of the lacquer pieces came from eminent



Rectangular box with white brass inlay and frame. First half of 17th century, late Ming. 15.8 cm x 12.3 cm x 9.4 cm. Photograph courtesy China Institute of America.

American museums, but some came from leading American dealers in Chinese art (like Alice Boney and Richard H. Ellsworth, both of New York City), and others from the Museum for Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm. But all of the pieces gathered from these sources revealed the mastery of Chinese lacquer artists in creating beautiful basketry panels.

At the opening of *The Sumptuous Basket* show, I talked with James Watt, the guest curator. “Lacquer,” he told me, “is a natural plastic. It is resistant to everything.” The effects of extremes of temperature—such as those experienced in Paris and New York City apartments, for instance—are too well-known among restorers. Collectors of art tend to forget about the damage caused by hot, dry interiors in winter and by humid ones in summer. The toll on fine French furniture from the age of the three Louis to that of the two Napoleons, in just these two cities alone, has been terrible. “Lacquer does crack in extremely dry conditions,” Mr. Watt observed, “otherwise it will last forever.” Because of inadequate care, very few Coromandel

screens—delightful in interiors and darlings of contemporary American decorators—have been preserved. “Most of the damages to Chinese lacquer,” Mr. Watt emphasized, “occurred within the last century, particularly within the last few decades.” Only London and the famed country houses of the English have been immune because they are, as many visitors know, notoriously unheated. In the manner of the nursery rhyme Pussy Cat, cognoscenti of Chinese lacquer head for London, still a gold mine for these works of art.

With the introduction of paper bags and now plastic ones, even the most rugged of shoppers in contemporary America rarely thinks of using baskets. The chic prefer brand names and tags—Gucci, Pucci, Tucci—to woven baskets of any kind, including sumptuous sorts. I have discovered that besides serious connoisseurs of art, those Americans most likely to appreciate the intricacy in basket art are dentists, surgeons, and other professionals who rely on their hands. Many other Americans do not fully appreciate the kind of work on display in *The Sump-*

tuous Basket because the artistry is to be seen in decorative surfaces rather than in art objects *per se*.

Still, the tradition of lacquering baskets is very much alive in Burma. Elsewhere—in China and in places where Chinese have settled in recent years—their manual talents have attracted them to assembly-line work, while smaller numbers have prospered as professional artists. Fads in America and the West can have crippling effects upon Asian craftsmen, though. With rising demand for any craft, the number of craftsmen swells. Sadly, decline in these crafts is rapid when there is little or no demand. Consequently, when Chinese Coromandel screens of at least a century old are auctioned in New York City, they often command as much as \$30,000 each. The highest price on record is a quarter of a million dollars for a 17th-century Coromandel screen. Yet, the average contemporary Coromandel screen can be had in Hong Kong for less than \$10,000. But the antique and the contemporary Coromandel screens are essentially similar—normally nine feet high, 20 inches wide, and consist of 12 decorated panels. Aesthetes and philistines alike agree that a Coromandel screen transforms any interior.

Of the 33 works of lacquer basketry recently shown at China House, James Watt singled out a late-16th-century Ming example as his favorite. "It is such a rich piece," he explained, "reflecting material prosperity in an area which was particularly prosperous." The piece Mr. Watt found so satisfying was a rectangular tray with painted decoration and mother-of-pearl inlay. It was no longer than an average arm, elbow to palm, and no wider. The enchantment of this Ming tray owed to

its tremendous range of colors, all exceedingly subtle, modest but timeless in their beauty. Augmented with mother-of-pearl, these colors had the effect upon my eyes that Borges fiction has upon my mind. Contemplating this work inspired a feeling of elevation and pride in human creativity, an assurance that for all the darkness created by some men, there are others who can please many by the excellence of their art. What this Ming tray depicted was a natural setting in which two gentlemen (on the inside of the tray) dressed in black and red are seated at a red lacquer table, eating and drinking. It is the sort of setting, simple yet so inspiring in its tranquillity, about which writers like Somerset Maugham and our own James Michener could have written a fine account. Once, inspired by a Coromandel screen, Maugham did in fact write about it, and one of the finest books on Ukiyo-e, *Japanese Prints: From the Early Masters to the Modern*, is by Mr. Michener.

Lacquer basketry in China had Neolithic origins, although most of the pieces shown at China House date from the late Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. These cherished possessions of today once served as containers of grain and satisfied quotidian needs of the Chinese. Four basic techniques—all very old—may be seen in Chinese basketweaving: twill, twill and wrap, twine, and checker. Twill was the most commonly used of the four.

Bamboo, because of its abundance and its wide use, has always seemed to me a most democratic medium, unlike, say, bronze. Chinese made remarkable use of both bronze and bamboo, but baskets remained central to

Chinese material culture. And in their zeal for keeping records, the Chinese naturally scrutinized their basketry. Published in the early 17th century, *Sancai tuihui, Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Three Realms* (Heaven, Earth, and Man), covers all phases of Chinese basketry chronologically, complete with illustrations. According to Mr. Watt, the guest curator, use of lacquer on basketry began in earnest only in the Eastern Han period (25-220 A.D.). But some accomplished lacquer basketry comes from the kingdom of Chu, in South China, during the Warring States era (475-221 B.C.). Later, lacquer basketry flourished in the Jiangnan region at the time of the Southern Song (1127-1279) and along the southeastern coastal provinces of China under the late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

Mr. Watt also pointed out that during the Ming dynasty, Chinese artists first developed a lacquerware "in which exposed basketry panels woven of very fine bamboo strips were part of the decorated surface of lacquered articles constructed out of bamboo or partly of wood." It is this type of lacquerwork, from which the 33 examples were selected for exhibition at China House, that Mr. Watt discusses at length in his catalogue (*The Sumptuous Basket*, \$15 plus \$2 for postage from China Institute in America, 125 East 65th Street, New York, NY 10021, (212) 744-8181).

Outside of Chinese art, it is unusual to find objects of daily use that are so artistically enjoyable. An aunt whom I love once had a myna bird. As a child, I was asked to catch crickets for the bird to eat. I abhorred the task, partly because we had no containers to feed the insects live to our myna bird. I learned from reading Mr. Watt's catalogue that in 13th-century China, cricket cages of silver basketry were used in the region of modern Hangzhou, a provincial capital of Zhejiang. And so in a room for wonder I was reminded of a myna bird. The recollection was perhaps insignificant, but the beauty of China's art is meant to revive and enrich the memories of everyday life. cc

Shehbaz Safrani is a writer and painter based in New York City.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Conservative Revolution in America by Guy Sorman; Regnery; Chicago. The French perspective is provocative, but an index would have been helpful to buyers anxious to locate "the good parts"—i.e., the sections about them and their friends.

Wintering by Diana Kappel-Smith; Little, Brown; Boston; \$15.95. A winter spent with deer, owls, hares, and hardy farmers in the Green Mountains of Vermont.

William Morris and the Middle Ages; edited by Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris; Manchester University Press; Manchester, England. A catalogue of artwork—including beautiful color plates—and essays reminding us of the creative powers of a Victorian whose socialism owed more to the splendors of medievalism than to the economic theories of his contemporaries.



Letter From Washington

by Samuel T. Francis

To the Pretoria Station

Governments, Lenin once wrote, never fall unless they are first pushed. Whatever his faults, the old Bolshevik must have known something about how to get rid of unwanted regimes. In the Revolution of 1917, it was the Imperial German government that helped to push over what was left of the Russian state by dispatching Lenin and his friends from Swiss exile to St. Petersburg on the famous "sealed train." In the case of South Africa, the government of the United States is about to play a similar role.

In June and July, the U.S. Congress, against the wishes of the Reagan Administration, imposed economic sanctions on South Africa as an "incentive" to end apartheid. Those sanctions passed by the House were pretty stringent; those from the Senate, less so; but the differences will be adjudicated in conference between the two chambers, and the President probably will not veto the final bill. The enactment of these sanctions against a friendly country with which we transact a multimillion-dollar business, the government of which has generally supported the more controversial parts of our foreign policy and which has never harmed any American citizen, sets in motion a process that may well end in the destruction of the most civilized society on the African continent.

The violent agitation within South Africa is largely under the control of the Communist-dominated African National Congress and its front groups and agents. The Communists and their fellow travelers also play a significant role in mobilizing the anti-apartheid movement in the United States. Indeed, it is fair to say that the Communists and the extreme left set

the pace of this movement. Of course, many of them are not smart enough to be real Communists. Recently, Mayor Barry of Washington proposed that the name of Massachusetts Avenue, where the South African Embassy is located, be changed to "Nelson Mandela Avenue," after the Marxist revolutionary who is now serving a life sentence in South Africa for his role in a Communist-organized terrorist conspiracy of the 1960's. What the Communists and revolutionaries want is not "freedom" but the destruction of South African society and the imposition of their own tyrannical power.

Non-Communist elements predominate numerically in the anti-apartheid movement, and their motives are mixed. The puddingheads who arrange to have themselves arrested in front of the South African Embassy every day, while partly fascinated by the word "Liberation," are really more concerned to revive the civil rights movement as the base of a viable left-wing political coalition, something Jesse Jackson conspicuously failed to do in the last election. Then there are the establishment liberals who support sanctions on South Africa because they cannot operate in their social and political milieu without supporting them. Finally, there are moderates and some conservatives who, having committed themselves to the position that it is the proper business of the United States to foster democracy and free enterprise everywhere in the world, lack a firm philosophical basis for resisting the arguments against South Africa. It is not uncommon to hear such people claim that there is no difference between South Africa and the Soviet Union, for example, though few are courageous enough to propose serious sanctions against the Soviets and none have the cultural power to lead a mass movement for such sanctions.

The vanguard of the anti-apartheid movement, then, consists of the revolutionary left, and it is from the far left

that the demand for sanctions originated. The left will not be satisfied with measures that only "make a statement"; it wants sanctions that will cripple and destabilize the South African economy and government, and it will keep demanding such sanctions until they are passed. And who in the anti-apartheid coalition will resist their demands? Little Stevie Wonder, who accepted his 1985 Oscar in the name of Nelson Mandela? Jesse Jackson, one of whose top advisers is himself a former member of the Communist Party and a present member of the World Peace Council? Or perhaps the establishment liberals, who even now are inventing excuses for not helping anti-Communist forces in Asia, Africa, and Latin America? When, in their overextended and miserable careers, have these people ever resisted Communism effectively?

Nor will the moderates who supported the sanctions on South Africa provide an effective brake on the far left. Their foreign policy is based on the dubious premise that the United States must officially punish countries that do not conform to our institutions and traditions (and their interpretation of our institutions and traditions is itself dubious). Their feeble argument against tougher sanctions is simply that they would harm South African Blacks, just as their argument for aid to the Nicaraguan contras is that the Sandinistas are not good for democracy in Nicaragua. The national interest of the United States does not appear to be a significant element in their world view, and the soft sanctions legislation that they guided through the Senate contain provisions for harder measures if there is insufficient progress by the South Africans in ending "apartheid," which is not precisely defined in the bill.

In South Africa itself, reforms undertaken by the ruling National Party in the last few years have gone far to dismantle apartheid, a term that is seldom used there today. Naïfs in