

Turner Memorabilia from Maria Tanner's Collection, Sotheby's

Visionary Art

Charles Paul Freund

THESE SPECTACLES, auctioned in the fall by Sotheby's, are said to have belonged to J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), the British painter whose wholly original treatment of luminosity late in his career inspired the Impressionists and revolutionized art. But British eye surgeon James McGill, a student of Turner's work, believes the glasses are evidence that Turner's late style was actually a result of his deteriorating vision. Turner "was painting exactly what he saw," McGill told Britain's *Guardian*.

Turner's vision has been debated before, but McGill's diagnosis is a specific one: The painter suffered some color blindness, affecting his reds and blues, and saw the world through cataracts. The latter would have resulted in his perceiving "exactly that effect of dazzling shimmering light we see in the paintings."

If true, such a diagnosis would hardly diminish Turner; it would make his achievements more impressive, because he'd have chosen to make his disability a part of his method. Yet despite a wealth of suggestive case studies—Goya's work changed dramatically following a

bout of apparent lead poisoning; Guy de Maupassant's syphilis may have affected his late writing—the effort to understand art in terms of biology remains peripheral, and art remains locked in its Romantic cage.

If Turner did strive to make art from a clouded vision, his effort would have been one of intensifying intellectual engagement with the world, not of Romantic spiritual alienation from it. A Turner with fading sight would not have been trapped by biology; he would have been using his work to transcend it. ■

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In many cities the job of school superintendent offers all the satisfactions of the town spear catcher. Able people often leave the job pierced in soul if not in body. Cities such as Seattle and Portland can get qualified men and women to apply for the job but can't keep applicants interested long enough to hire anyone.

A few hardy souls, such as Boston's Tom Payzant and San Diego's Alan Bersin, hang in there. But most superintendents either quit in frustration or are fired when school boards that can't settle on anything else agree that the superintendent is no good.

Superintendents are not all equally well prepared or skillful, but the problem is more with the job than with the people. School superintendents are expected to keep everyone happy, even such groups as parents of gifted and disadvantaged children who are in a zero-sum competition for money. They are supposed to maintain a warm, fuzzy relationship with teachers whose unions are constantly undercutting reform efforts and grabbing any new money that becomes available for salaries and smaller class sizes. They are supposed to get results out of a district central office, many of whose staff members are tenured lifers or have their own power bases in local churches, neighborhoods, and political clubs.

Superintendents are ultimately fired or driven to distraction by school boards, which do a wonderful job of representing all the conflicts and confusions that exist in their communities. It's hard to see how school boards as constituted can do anything else: they too face fractured communities

and incompatible demands. But unlike the superintendent they have somebody on whom they can take out their frustrations.

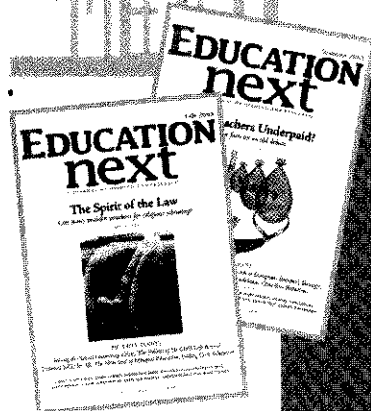
Education insiders keep searching for a mutant strain of individuals who can succeed under these circumstances. But the real problem is with the jobs themselves, both of superintendent and of school board member.

These jobs are setups. Superintendents and school board members are expected to take responsibility for things that they can't influence because state and federal regulations and collective bargaining agreements stand in the way. The scope of the superintendents' nominal powers—hiring all the teachers, spending all the money, choosing all the books, managing all the buses—is so great that every kind of conflict or grievance comes straight to them.

The key to making superintendent and school board jobs doable is to refine the excessive powers and duties to the few that matter, such as focusing on charter schools rather than hiring teachers, holding schools accountable for children's learning instead of dealing with grievances, sending dollars to the schools that parents choose in place of fiddling with centrally administered budgets, withdrawing support from schools that do not teach effectively, developing new schools to replace failed ones, and letting parents choose among schools rather than trying to make the best of a bad family-school match.

Superintendents and school boards can trade in grandiose roles for simpler but more consequential ones and catch a lot fewer spears in the bargain.

— Paul T. Hill

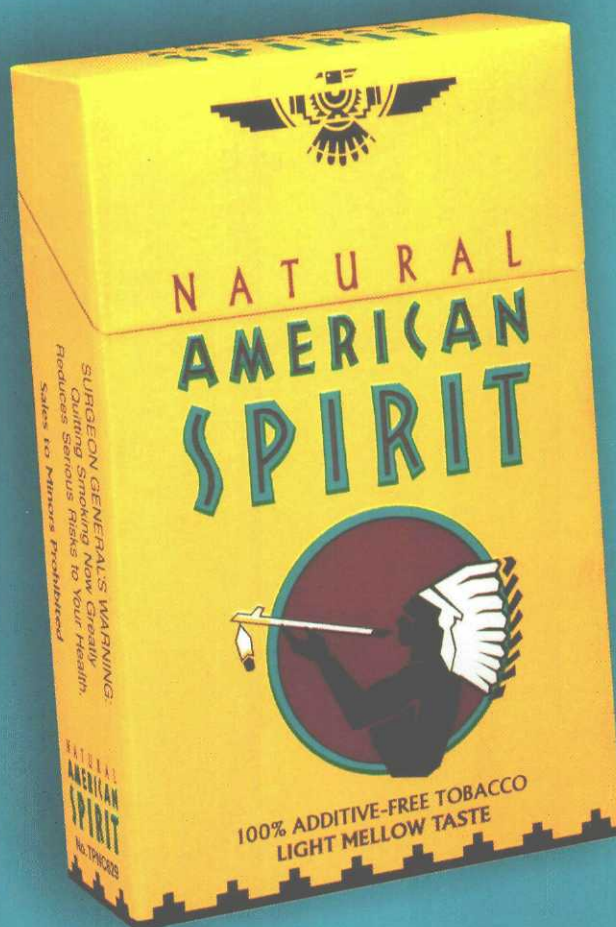


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