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From the essay “The Reverse of the Medal” (2003, updated 4 Dec. 2010)

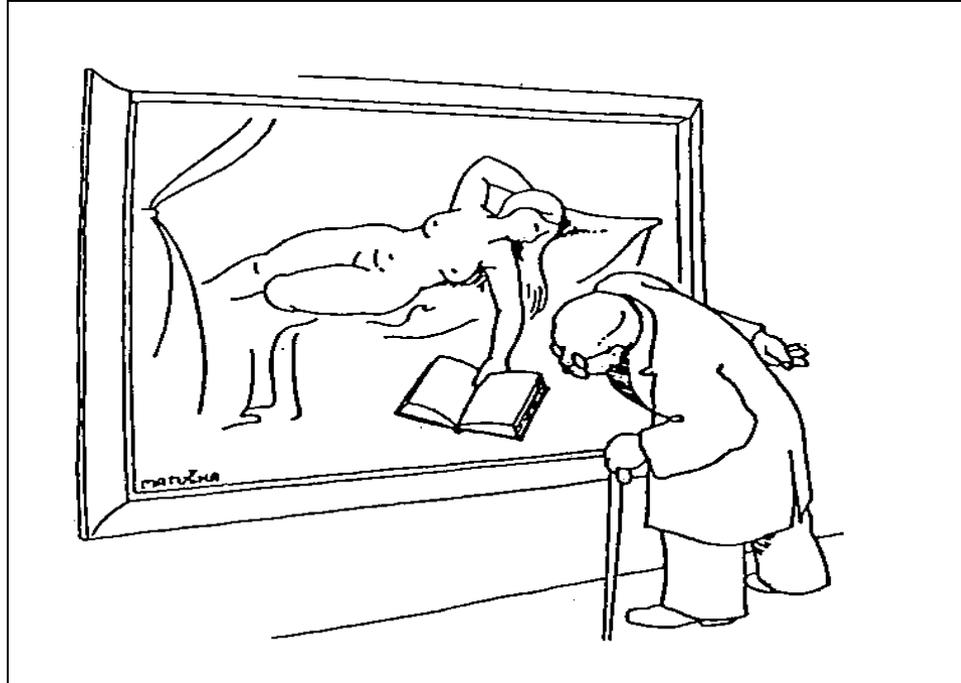
America, America

Sometime in the early 1990s I arranged to visit a number of US institutions active in the emerging area of full-text scientific journals, and some other prominent institutions, like MIT in order to adjust service development policies. On contacts with my counterparts at several laboratories, including the Stanford Linear Accelerator Lab. (SLAC) concerning co-operation matters, I was invited also to present our development projects, results and current plans. At SLAC, after an account of the modernization strategy and its results, I put some emphasis on the co-operation issue concerning the preprints databases – the main source of genuine savings by a scheme of distributed responsibilities, since there was, for long-standing “political” reasons a large overlap (waste) of efforts. I reiterated the desirability of a standard exchange format and suggested that we (at CERN) might assume responsibility for whatever, in the European region, was not covered by DESY (Hamburg), and possibly other regions, to reduce the load of other contributors. I explicitly pointed out that the cost-effectiveness of the SLAC-DESY co-operation was unbeatable due to the level of staff costs at CERN. I also mentioned the possibilities, just tested in practice, to scan and store preprints and reports on optical disk (bitmapping the offset-printed texts not available as text files) in order to create a depository that could serve the whole community – there was a massive “loss” in hardcopy collections in all open-shelf libraries, and quite excessive in the CERN preprint collection. It was in this context that I mentioned Carlo Rubbia’s “best in the world” directives, which could only be met jointly by systematic co-operation. [CR, on his assuming power at CERN, amazingly –and as it turned out, destructively, had proclaimed that the CERN Scientific Information Services had to meet the demand of being “best in the world” – in an undefined sense, thus intrinsically always vulnerable to his favourite evaluation “CRAP!”]

Great was my surprise on hearing what my division leader John Ellis found out from a colleague at SLAC: I allegedly had raised havoc by claiming that our service “was better than its SLAC counterpart” – if quoted correctly, this would have been an infantile statement in substance exactly the opposite of the conclusions of my professional analysis presented at the seminar – an inattentive, or possibly malevolent listener had spread the rumour – probably one of my colleagues seeing an advantage in “politicizing” a professional issue to gain an ever so small advantage. This allegation was *de facto* a reference to Rubbia’s “best in the world” directives which years earlier had caused John Ellis and myself such headache in formulating a reasonable and financially viable development plan. Perhaps I should have been proud of taking the beating aimed at the great man – I was not!

Towards the end of my presentation I mentioned the difficulty of upgrading the library premises, heavily worn down by intensive use. I had been able to recruit an architect friend of mine, a famous Univ. of Bath specialist on museums and libraries, who had designed a congenial and very attractive building project. The construction phase had been approved and adequate funds had been allocated. But

there had come up new obstacles *inter alia* a lack of inter-divisional consensus on access to poorly used prime space, so the project was frozen (only to be revived and executed many years later exactly as originally planned, at a higher cost). I had found a really charming and clever cartoon which illustrated the wide-spread downgrading of investment in environmental quality.



It was actually a paraphrase on Titiano's *Venus from Urbino* and Velázquez *Rokeby Venus*, paintings that have had enormous impact on Western art.





The cartoon showed a reclining nude - and I here strongly make the distinction between the concepts of “nude” and “naked” emphasized in a famous treatise by Sir Kenneth Clark -, holding a book (instead of the mirror in Velázquez’ version), and the cartoonist had added a gentleman looking at the painting but more interested in the book than the figure.

Someone in a back row was shouting “take away this picture - it disturbs our feelings!”. My immediate thought was that this was a (bad) joke – so I took away the transparency and thought (my great mistake, as there turned out to be a particularly vicious sequel) that I would hear no more about it. Afterwards there was a perfectly normal discussion on service developments in the upcoming networks.

However, on my return to CERN, I was told that the matter had been aggressively reported to the Director General of CERN, with the comment that I had seriously damaged the relations between the two laboratories, and that this abuse could not be repaired “unless there was a change...”. The report did not present any details that would have enabled the receiver to judge the relevance of the accusation, but that was not felt to be necessary – nor any consultation with the alleged perpetrator. Among “gentlemen peers” one does not question the “good intentions” – a system where denunciation is part of management has its own definition of “normality” and “decency”.

I later recalled the imperative “Take it away, it hurts our feelings!”. Indeed, I had long after the event been told by a mathematician-friend well versed in US society, that there are, even to-day, sectarian congregations that would off-hand regard any artistic representation of the nude as pornographic (I here reiterate the distinction between

the nude and the naked, emphasized by Sir Kenneth Clark in his famous treatise on ideal art). The furore might also be explained by a general dismissive attitude towards art in general, or, finally, by socially imposed alignment (at least in public) to neo-Victorian political correctness. All of these dangerously closely bring to mind the condemnation of “entartete Kunst” in NS Germany, the *auto da fés*, the imposition of “Social Realism” in USSR, and iconoclasm as we know it all through the history of intolerance, most recently in Mao’s cultural revolution and in the Taleban regime. There is a striking resemblance with the sordid incident of the destruction of Rembrandt’s masterpiece “Danaë” by a Russian religious fanatic in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in 1985 – it is worth noting that there is also a striking iconographic resemblance between the Rembrandt and the Titiano and Velázquez paintings.



I cannot bring myself to believe that an inhomogeneous and largely intellectual audience like the one I met at SLAC would unanimously and vehemently react with hurt feelings on this charming, innocent, and clever cartoon with its roots in the great masters of the Italian Renaissance, But this - in the absence of any explanation provided on repeated requests - seems to be the only possible explanation if one takes the scarce information provided at face value. Could it be that the “unanimous” response reported was the result of social pressure demanding alignment to an “official opinion” imposed from above. Most strange in a society so proud of its liberal tradition. The alternative, which I do not like to express, is to question the credibility of the official statement from a SLAC director, asserting a collective opinion behind the denunciation. Was it plainly mendacious and did it have a “political” rationale – a Ressort-Streit as it would have been called in NS-Germany?

Note 1: “You enter [the Uffizi in Firenze] and proceed to that most-visited little gallery that exists in the world -- the Tribune-- and there, against the wall, without obstructing rap or leaf, you may look your fill upon the foulest,

the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses -- Titian's Venus. It isn't that she is naked and stretched out on a bed --no, it is the attitude of one of her arms and hand. If I ventured to describe that attitude there would be a fine howl --but there the Venus lies for anybody to gloat over that wants to --and there she has a right to lie, for she is a work of art, and art has its privileges. I saw a young girl stealing furtive glances at her; I saw young men gazing long and absorbedly at her, I saw aged infirm men hang upon her charms with a pathetic interest. How I should like to describe her --just to see what a holy indignation I could stir up in the world...yet the world is willing to let its sons and its daughters and itself look at Titian's beast, but won't stand a description of it in words....There are pictures of nude women which suggest no impure thought -- I am well aware of that. I am not railing at such. What I am trying to emphasize is the fact that Titian's Venus is very far from being one of that sort. Without any question it was painted for a bagnio and it was probably refused because it was a trifle too strong. In truth, it is a trifle too strong for any place but a public art gallery." (Mark Twain: *A Tramp Abroad*, 1880. This declaration, amazingly, is not to be read as ironic!)

Note 2: "In 1815, the Spanish Inquisition summoned Goya to reveal who commissioned him to create the "obscene" *La maja desnuda*, and he was consequently stripped of his position as the Spanish court painter. If Goya gave an explanation of the painting's origin to the Inquisition, that account has never surfaced. Two sets of stamps depicting *La maja desnuda* in commemoration of Goya's work were privately produced in 1930, and later approved by the Spanish Postal Authority. That same year, the United States government barred and returned any mail bearing the stamps". (From Wikipedia).

The Roman Catholic Inquisition was institutionalized in the early 13th Century. In Spain it was functional until 1834. It would seem that it has offshoots in places to the present.

