

# Roger Scruton, heroic champion of art and truth

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM January 20, 2020



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

It may be the fate of most public intellectuals to become more and more public and less and less intellectual; it was never that of the late Roger Scruton.

To say that is not to ignore his vigorous engagement in political controversy. However, the positions he took were the fruit of his vast scholarly output.

One of the century's most eminent philosophers, he deserves to be remembered not for the polemics hurled at him but as a thinker whose work was as rich and deep as his knowledge was astonishingly broad.

Scruton was, first and foremost, a philosopher of aesthetics. Inevitably,

he cut his teeth on Immanuel Kant's notoriously complex Critique of the Power of Judgment (the so-called Third Critique), which inaugurated modern aesthetics and remains its crowning achievement.

Having set out a masterly reappraisal of the Third Critique in his *Art and the Imagination* (1974), Scruton substantially revised his approach once he had absorbed the full implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later writings.

Notably in musicology, where his erudition and sheer technical mastery were prodigious, he brought new rigour to the definition of the aesthetic experience and to our understanding of the distinction between music, sound and noise.

But his contributions went well beyond the field's conceptual foundations. To begin with, he clarified the nature and enduring importance of "high culture" and of the classical tradition.

High culture, he argued, not only spoke to what is best in our shared humanity; it also exemplified the virtues of excellence, discipline and care. In societies in which the aura inspired by faith had all but vanished, it made it possible to reconnect "to those primordial experiences of wonder and awe which show us the lasting meaning of our life on earth".

And at a time when authenticity was being swamped by manufactured feelings, "art is the final test of sincerity: the one thing which cannot be faked", projecting, with near-miraculous freshness, "a vision of human life that enables us to live to the full, to accept our mortality, and to recognise in the intensity of our experience the value of being what we are".

His, however, was no hidebound attachment to a rigid canon. On the contrary, Scruton stressed the truth of Edmund Burke's adage that a tradition without the means of change is without the means of its conservation. But he also agreed with Burke that those who do not look

back to their ancestry will not look forward to their posterity. What mattered was the incessant dialogue between the past and the present in which “the forms and styles of art must be remade not in order to repudiate tradition, but to restore it”.

Nor did he believe high culture could exist in splendid isolation. Rather, he pioneered the analysis of “the aesthetics of everyday life”, which both guides the way we design the structures that lend continuity to the world we inhabit and shapes the manner in which we present ourselves to that world.

It was the ability of high culture to interact with those choices that allowed its traces to endure long after its creators had been consigned to museums and textbooks.

Finally, Scruton showed how, within each national tradition, high culture and “the aesthetics of everyday life” fused in a “common culture” that “endows the world with meaning”, enabling us to “find (our) identity in the world and not in opposition to it”. It was out of his attachment to that “common culture” — and not from any chauvinism or bigotry — that Scruton placed such importance on defending what TE Lawrence in *The Mint* sensed as an “unformulated loyalty” that “grew obscurely while men and women walked the streets or the lanes of their homeland”.

All that undoubtedly made Scruton a cultural conservative. Indeed, he argued that anyone who saw “the value of culture in general and art in particular as residing in the transmission of intrinsic values”, and who understood that “knowledge of those values is more easily lost than won”, was “bound to be a cultural conservative”, quite regardless of their political views.

And precisely because a society shorn of such values, and which discarded millennia of slowly accumulating common sense, condemned its citizens to never feel at home in the world, he was fearless in attacking

“the attempt to erode whatever is ‘established’ which is the single most striking feature of ‘progressive’ thought”.

The results of that erosion had, in his view, been devastating. In architecture, for example, modernism, with its contempt for inherited forms, had imposed a “vernacular whose stack of horizontal layers, with jutting and obtrusive corners, built without intelligible relation to its neighbours” destroyed “the essence of the street as a common home” and reduced cities such as London and Sydney to soulless aggregates of towering monstrosities.

To make matters worse, when its failures caused modernism’s demise, the postmodernism that replaced it was “not an attempt to avoid mistakes, but to build in such a way that the very concept of a mistake has no application”. In this area of art, as in so many others, “we are consequently living beyond judgment, beyond value, beyond objectivity”.

The fault for those outcomes did not lie in mass culture. It lay in the rise to cultural dominance — in academia, the great cultural institutions and the commentariat — of a cultural mafia, supported through government patronage, for whom “serious knowledge of art and culture”, which can be acquired only through gruelling hard work, “seems to be a handicap”. There was therefore a vital question Western society had to face: “How do we rescue culture from the elites, identify and pass on the cultural products that matter, and do so as a service to culture, rather than to those who are currently in charge of it?”

Given the erudition he marshalled in prosecuting his case, it was hardly surprising that he provoked torrents of puerile outrage from the cultural “progressives”. But the fact so few of those who should have stood by him did made the onslaught much harder to bear.

None of that deterred him; he fought till the end. There is, for that steadfastness, no fitter elegy than the magnificent verse in John

Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* which records the moment when Christian, having refreshed himself at the spring, began to climb "the hill, called Difficulty," saying:

*"This Hill, though high, I covet to ascend,  
The difficulty will not me offend;  
For I perceive the way to life lies here;  
Come, pluck up, Heart; lets neither faint nor fear;  
Better, tho difficult, th'right way to go,  
Than wrong, though easie, where the end is wo."*