

## Recent highlights from the Ideas blog

*Bring back middlebrow!; Brainiac*

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Author: Shea, Christopher

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### Document Text

Years ago, when W. A. Pannapacker, an associate professor of English at Hope College, in Holland, Mich., arrived at graduate school, he still kept on his shelves some books from his childhood that he especially treasured.

Perhaps the most revered set of volumes {hellip} was Great Books of the Western World, in 54 leatherette volumes. I remember I bought them all at once for \$10 at a church sale when I was about 13; it took me two trips to carry them home in plastic grocery bags.

These books (as well as a Time-Life series on the American West, done up in "hand-tooled Naugahyde leather") marked him as the product of a middlebrow background.

Intellectuals have long scoffed at middlebrow pretensions. "If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me `middlebrow,' " Virginia Woolf once wrote, "I will take my pen and stab him, dead." And, to be sure, Pannapacker's books produced raised eyebrows when his graduate-student friends visited.

But in reflections prompted by reading "A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books" by Globe columnist Alex Beam, Pannapacker laments the disappearance from American family-room shelves of such volumes. "For all their shortcomings," he writes in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "the Great Books - along with many other varieties of middlebrow culture - reflected a time when the liberal arts commanded more respect."

But we're the center of the universe

In announcing the recipients of the 2009 Nobel prize in economics, some news organizations stressed that a woman won for the first time. Elinor Ostrom, of Indiana University, shared the prize with Berkeley's Oliver E. Williamson.

Others emphasized the intellectual content of the duo's work. The two scholars had explored how institutions and other human-devised frameworks can improve and solidify economic arrangements that might appear, judging from the math alone, to be potentially unstable.

Yet the following is the angle that Harvard's undergraduate newspaper, the Crimson, chose to play up (after a nod to the more widely reported points): The Nobel committee had slighted Harvard, yet again. The gall!

"This will be the twelfth consecutive year that Harvard has not been represented among the Economic Sciences category winners of the Nobel Prize," lamented the paper, noting that the last Harvard recipient was Robert C. Merton, in 1997.

The Crimson even attempted to gin up a bit of controversy. It printed part of a provocative e-mail from a current Harvard PhD student (and former editorial chair of the Crimson, class of `08), that suggested

Harvard was robbed. (And who could possibly be more qualified to comment on the decision?) He wrote: "Bottom Line: Everyone here at Harvard thought that Oliver Hart, who is at Harvard, would and should win with Oliver Williamson, and people are really disappointed that he was not recognized."

The Nobel selection committee is on notice. Hart may have missed his shot. But Harvard still expects a win for Professor Robert Barro. And soon.

### Knockoffs, 18th-century style

Chinese entrepreneurs who illegally copy and sell American movies and CDs are a headache for content producers and a sticking point in trade negotiations. Who knew that the American portrait artist Gilbert Stuart experienced the same migraines more than two centuries ago?

Stuart is best known for his portraits of George Washington, and, as it happens, it was precisely these that most interested the Chinese. After the American Revolution, a somewhat inexplicable Washington-mania took root in Qing-dynasty China. With the connivance of American traders, Chinese artists got access to a few original Stuart portraits and created their own versions. (No doubt there were copies of copies, too). These works were often on glass, and often notably less stylized, or less heroic in aspect, than the originals.

The New Britain Museum of American Art recently received as a gift a Washington painting on glass attributed to the Chinese artist Foeiqua. "As soon as it went on display, it became the subject of a great debate," said Douglas Hyland, the museum's director, in ArtNews. "Should it be at an American art museum? Is it an American work of art?"

Stuart, who was perpetually in debt, fought largely unsuccessful court battles to keep what he viewed as fakes off the market. No one knows how many Chinese "Stuarts" exist today, but ArtNews observes that the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, has two glass paintings similar to the work on display in New Britain. It also possesses a Chinese painting of the soldier-statesman, being borne away, upon his death, by angels.

Christopher Shea is a weekly columnist for Ideas. He can be reached at [brainiac.email@gmail.com](mailto:brainiac.email@gmail.com).

Credit: Christopher Shea, Globe Correspondent

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<b>Abstract</b> (Document Summary)
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