
Pro Rege

Volume 50 | Number 1

Article 4

September 2021

Leave Them Alone

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Recommended Citation

Speyers, Frank (2021) "Leave Them Alone," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 50: No. 1, 35 - 41.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol50/iss1/4

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Frank Speyers, Emeritus Professor of Art & Art History at Calvin University, was raised in the Netherlands until 1956, when he immigrated with his parents to Canada. He came to the States in 1967 to attend Calvin University, then earned a Master's in Communication Design from Pratt Institute (1977) in New York City, where he was influenced by the design theories of Herb Lubalin and Christopher Alexander. While pursuing post-graduate studies at Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1990, he collaborated with Massimo Vignelli in the formulation of design pedagogy. Frank worked as a brand designer for a number of Fortune 500 corporations, prior to teaching design as a language. He has also served and continues to serve a number of other clients.¹ Since retiring in 2018, he divides his time be-

tween painting in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Park and with his wife, enjoying time with children and grandchildren in Detroit.

Awards and recognition include the 1986 Grumbacher Art Award for Best in Show of the League of Reston Artists USGS Annual Show, for a set of serigraphs entitled "Summer Reflections"; the 1999 Michigan Museum Association Quest for Excellence Award for the Calvin Art Faculty catalog, *Works of our Hands*; the 1986 Art League of Virginia for a painting titled *West Texas Twister*, and the 1993 Rubelle & Norman Schafner Gallery, New York, NY, for Exhibition of outstanding work, by Pratt Alumni Publication in the 2017 *Cowboys & Indians* magazine article titled "West of the Imagination."²

*Leave Them Alone*³



by Franklin Speyers (2014)

Jacob van Ruisdael (b.1628), particularly his painting *The Breakwater* (1670-72), was the self-conscious starting point for my painting *Leave Them Alone*. Then, in 2014, I felt compelled to appropriate and transmute part of Pieter Bruegel's 1568 painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* into van Ruisdael's motif—in my painting—in order

to draw a parallel between their contexts and ours. I'm not the first to be inspired by the works of van Ruisdael, as the works below suggest. It has been said that painter J.M.W. Turner worshiped van Ruisdael and John Constable adored him from afar.



Rough Sea at the Jetty, Jacob van Ruisdael, 1650s



The Hay Wain, John Constable, 1821



Fishing Boats, J.M.W. Turner, 1837-38

Rarely has anyone been able to capture Presence in landscape as van Ruisdael did, with perhaps the exception of 19th-century Hudson River School

painter Frederick Edwin Church, in *Twilight in the Wilderness*, for example.



Twilight in the Wilderness, Frederic Edwin Church, 1860

Yet how does one respond to these giants? I believe that serious art students should look to previous works of art to understand that artists engage in art criticism and assessment by reaching backward to a predecessor's syntax, incorporating and transmuting motifs from other formal configurations, thereby making them new.

In 1566, Erasmus published his *Adagia*, which contained the quote by the Roman poet Horace, "Caecus caco dux" ("The blind leader of the blind"). Two years later, in 1568, Bruegel, apparently fa-

miliar with classical literature, as with the Biblical reference based on Jesus' words in Matthew 15:14, painted *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Art historians suggest that Bruegel was likely protesting the 16th-century mass arrests and execution of Protestants in what was Spanish Netherlands. Bruegel placed six blind men in predictable postures. However, unlike his later work, which typified peasant clothing, these men were well dressed and could well have been the leaders of his day.



The Blind Leading the Blind, Pieter Bruegel, 1568

A hundred years later, during the 17th Century, when the Netherlands was establishing its national identity as an independent nation, there was considerable alteration of its landscape. Van Ruisdael, lamenting the emergent technological impact on the environment, painted a rogue natural world, in *Rough Sea at a Jetty* (1650s), echoing a national anxiety that prevailed in the zeitgeist of his day.

My painting *Leave Them Alone* embraces both protest and lament and goes further. The intersected highway guardrail suggests a failed Modernity and further exacerbates the off-kilter movement of the six figures. Times have changed: our contemporary context is more urgent. The oncoming storm may be equally construed as a prairie fire or

as something more apocalyptic. Behind it all lies a transcendent glory yet to be perceived and prized.

Provenance of the painting

Leave Them Alone, then, is an extended interpretation (the hermeneutic) and valuation (the critical normative) of both Van Ruisdael's and Pieter Bruegel the Elder's work. The idea of transmuting and incorporating part of Bruegel's masterpiece into a Van Ruisdael motif came as I meditated on the 2014 article "The Surreal Fine-Art Spectacle in Laguna Beach," in the *NYT Magazine*.⁴

Below that incorporation, I added the guardrail in the left lower corner of my painting, *Leave Them Alone*.



Leave Them Alone detail

This rethinking of other artists' works is a common practice among painters, which viewers of the immediate will look for. Artists comment on other artists in graduated degrees. They incorporate, quote, distort, fragment, or transmute motifs—both representational and formal aspects. Their references may be conscious or unconscious, mimetic or polemic. In any case, they are constant in art. The best interpretation of a work of art is another work of art. It is through this internalization of previous artist's works that artists discover their own sightings, though they may appear to be completely spontaneous in their own work.

From my viewpoint, art is most compelling and innovative where it is the most iconoclastic

in its declaration of intent as well as execution of commentary on another artist's work. My most persuasive guidance for this argument comes from the work completed by Dali that can be perceived as annotative studies of Ingres. Likewise, Picasso's work can largely be viewed as meditations of Velasquez. Similarly, Albrecht Dürer's work can be viewed as a re-articulation of the work of Flemish artists; in Cezanne's work, the mutations of Piero della Francesca's surfaces and spatial meditations appear; Manet's work suggests his examination of works by Goya; Monet's work suggests works of Turner. Even Van Gogh's 1889 *La Sieste* has an uncanny resemblance to Jean-Francois Millet's prior 1866 *La Sieste*.



La Sieste, Jean-Francois Millet, 1866



La Sieste, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889

All these painters are unmatched in their remarkably keen insights.

While Van Ruisdael continues to be the dominant visual syntax for my work *Leave Them Alone*, the construct had to be worked out by trial and error. At times, I felt as if the painting had a mind of its own. After carefully rendering in the six blind men, I covered the entire wood panel with a cadmium orange wash. No brush was large enough to

cover the area without leaving the telltale brushstrokes. So, I slipped on a pair of nitrile gloves and the fight was on. Was the paint opaque enough to cover the cad orange? How much of that under painted orange should I leave? Where should the light fall? On the men? The highway? Embracing the ambiguity of clouds versus prairie fire smoke intrigued me. It wasn't planned, but in the end, I embraced it.





Endnotes

1. Speyers' past and present clients: Marriott Corporation, Bethesda MD, Brookings Institution, American Bankers Assoc., The Williamsburg Charter Foundation, Washington D.C.; Cornerstone Investment Group, Herndon, VA; Women's History Council, Habitat for Humanity, DeVosPlace Convention Center, Grand Rapids Symphony and Grand Rapids Ballet, Steelcase, Caledonia, Michigan; Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, PA; Health Intervention Services, American Red Cross, American Civic Theatre, Grand Rapids MI; Herman Miller, Zeeland MI.
2. <https://frankspeyers.com/west-of-the-imagination/>
3. A version of this article was first published on Franklin Speyers' personal website: <https://frankspeyers.com/leave-them-alone/>
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-surreal-fine-art-spectacle-in-laguna-beach.html>