

# THE Nerdrum Affair



IN RESPONSE TO THE RECENT PRISON SENTENCE OF NORWEGIAN ARTIST ODD NERDRUM, AMERICAN ARTIST IS REVEALING SOME OF THE FACTS OF THE TRIAL AND GIVING SEVERAL OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES AN OPPORTUNITY TO VOICE THEIR OPINIONS.

by Allison Malafronte

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On August 3, 2011 internationally acclaimed painter Odd Nerdrum was sentenced to two years in prison by a local court in Oslo, Norway, on counts of tax evasion totaling more than \$2 million. The verdict started a frenzy of media activity from the artistic community, with Nerdrum supporters rallying around the artist through Facebook, blogs, petitions, exhibitions, and online groups. The collective indignation at the prison sentence was palpable—and although several artists were determined to prove the charges

erroneous, it was the prospect of Nerdrum not being permitted to paint during his two-year sentence that ignited the greatest levels of empathetic response from his contemporaries. “The work of Odd Nerdrum is a gift to a world much in need of culture,” stated professional portraitist and Studio Incamminati founder Nelson Shanks. “To in any way inhibit or prevent his work is a crime against humanity and should be condemned. No court is above this reproach.”

The tax-evasion investigation of Nerdrum began in 2002, with Norwegian authorities stating that from April 1999 to April 2003 the artist failed to report income from business transactions in the United States totaling \$2,530,738. Of that amount, Nerdrum put more than \$400,000 in a safe-deposit box

in Austria, causing the Norwegian government to suspect that the artist was intentionally hiding money. According to Nerdrum, the sum

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Self-Portrait as the Prophet of Painting (The Savior of Painting)**

1997, oil. All artwork this article courtesy The Nerdrum Institute, Disenå, Norway.

## ARTISTS RESPOND TO NERDRUM'S SENTENCE

### JOAKIM ERICSSON

Professional painter, academic director of the Mölndal, Sweden branch of The Florence Academy of Art



I find it deeply upsetting to see how Norway treats not only their best painter of all time but also one of the best painters who ever walked

the face of the earth. What Odd Nerdrum has accomplished in his work, and the inspiration he provides painters worldwide, has no comparison.

I believe that the motivation behind the Norwegian judicial system's verdict is this: **Independence is the state's worse fear, and Nerdrum's financial and artistic success outside of their economic structure is considered a threat.** Odd Nerdrum is a phenomenon that challenges the consensus and the sheep-minded mentality that pervades the contemporary art world, and therefore must be “dealt with.” I also think this trial is about sending a message to everyone else who aspires to have the kind of independence Nerdrum has achieved.

I will not even bother speculating whether Nerdrum is guilty of tax evasion, as that is not the point and way outside my expertise. Although, for the record, I don't believe that the charges are just. Still, for the government to not be satisfied with a fine, but instead sentence him to two years in prison with no possibility of painting, is completely outrageous. **It is a worse crime to keep a painter like Odd Nerdrum from working than it is to accidentally (if at all) not pay enough taxes.** The Norwegian state is already one of the richest in the world, and seeing their greed and how they treat a national icon is truly a tragedy.



**RICHARD THOMAS SCOTT**  
Professional painter, former pupil of  
Odd Nerdrum



The Odd Nerdrum I know is not the man I see portrayed in the Norwegian press, the man whose words they censor and twist. No, the man I know has freely given his

great knowledge to thousands of students, has inspired millions with his empathetic paintings, has spent his life fighting for human dignity. The man I know rescued me from homelessness. I don't understand why they demonize him, but perhaps I understand their misdirected anger.

I must say that Norway has committed a grave injustice. Let's be clear: the charge is not that he didn't pay taxes. He paid the taxes, and the court acknowledged this. The charge is that he intentionally hid money. Of this he is not guilty! We must remember the gravity of the situation: more than 36 massive canvases that he had painted with experimental techniques literally melted. He heroically repainted them and offered refunds, which was the only honorable solution. Odd spent 20 years paying for an honest mistake that any of us could have made.

Yet, the court convicted him based upon a nonexistent account at Chase bank, inflated numbers, and decades-old conjecture. They will not let him paint, though the musician Varg Vikernes was convicted for murder and burning churches and was allowed to release two albums from prison. The only explanation I see for such an unprecedented punishment is that the court has made a political ruling and not a judicial one.

Some blame rests on the unfortunate timing of Odd's case, coming just after such a great tragedy [the July 22, 2011 attacks on one of Oslo's government buildings and the attendees a youth camp on the island of Utøya]. That an atmosphere of the most profound grief may create such a distortion of perception is only human. But it is not acceptable. We must look back, in our later clarity, and resolve the rash decisions we've made in our blind grief. This is what it means to be just.



ABOVE  
**The Messenger**  
ca. 2004, oil.

was set aside because, from 1983 to 1989, he had experimented with a new medium and made close to 40 pictures with this method. In the 1990s, the fugitive mixture began to break down, causing the paint to drip. Forum Gallery, in New York City—which represented Nerdrum at the time—started receiving complaints from clients that the paintings were deteriorating. As a way to prepare for the imminent requests for compensation, Nerdrum took out a loan from Forum Gallery and put that money aside, intending to either reimburse his clients or repaint the pictures. As quoted in the English translation of the court case: “Odd Nerdrum did not at any point consider the sum as his money, rather it was Forum

Gallery's money, that lay in a 'limbo' deposit in Norway for potential reimbursement.” The money was later moved to Austria.

Although most of us are not in a position to dig too deeply into the legalities of the case, there are three main points of contention that seem to be surfacing among supporters: First, many feel the Norwegian state has been decidedly unfair and intentional in its negative portrayal of Nerdrum over the years and has made concerted efforts to ostracize and silence him, even before the investigation began. Second, many people claim that the Chase bank account in New York through which Nerdrum allegedly transferred two large sums of money is nonexistent.



**DANIEL GRAVES**  
Professional painter, founder and academic  
director of The Florence Academy of Art

Whether or not Odd Nerdrum committed tax evasion is something I'll leave to the Norwegian authorities, but I would hope that whatever crime they say he's committed fits the punishment he's been given. The two-year prison sentence without the chance to paint seems extremely harsh, especially when you look around the world and see deliberate criminal acts and conspiracies receiving far less punishment.

In response to this sentence, all of us artists feel a sense of camaraderie and want to rally around Odd in support of all the wonderful things he's contributed to art, culture, and the education of young people.

BELOW  
**The Tribute Coin**  
n.d., oil, 46 x 39%.

ABOVE RIGHT  
**David**  
n.d., oil, 13% x 13% .



**ALEXEY STEELE**  
Professional painter, founder of  
Classical Underground



I still remember the enormous impact Odd Nerdrum's *Namegivers* had on me after leaving the Soviet Union and arriving in the United States in the early 1990s.

Consumed with trying to figure out the realist tradition's place in a modern society, I saw his work as bright examples of the extraordinary possibilities available in this long-neglected art form. They still are.

The recent campaign by the Norwegian government against this influential visionary, a cultural icon and one of the true masters, amounts to nothing more than a governmental purging of intellectual independence. The glaring disconnect between the severity of punishment and incriminated actions, the questionable evidence and deeply flawed judicial process that would never stand the scrutiny of the U.S. judicial system all smacks of Stalin's infamous show trials. For the Norwegian government to throw the full wrath of its fury on Nerdrum while premeditated global banking crimes go unpunished is shameful, unconscionable, and despicable.

Odd Nerdrum is a true artist, and true artists can never be silenced.



**BRANDON KRALIK**  
Professional painter, former pupil of  
Odd Nerdrum



Odd Nerdrum and I have been friends for more than 10 years, and he has shown nothing but integrity, respect, and generosity to me and everyone with whom

I have seen him interact. Recently, just days before his trial, we took a drive from Paris to Sweden together to visit Rembrandt and talk along the way about painting. Sitting along the banks of the Trave in Lübeck, Germany, having breakfast with Odd was a more concise lesson in history than any college course.

We should remember that Odd worked tirelessly for many years to rediscover the secrets of making beautiful pictures. He did this against the current of the accepted artistic expression of our time and without the benefit of academies or teachers who could help him. When he “discovered” a medium that was wonderfully creamy, rich, and luminous he did what most any of us would have done: He used it.

It would be difficult to know what to do when many years later this medium proved to be flawed, and it’s easy to criticize whatever choice was made to make amends. Leonardo’s *Last Supper* suffers from the experimentation of a master as well. **The truth is that Odd did what he felt was best, and that was to keep the customers satisfied.** To do this he repainted pictures and had the gallery set aside money in the event of future claims. He has paid his taxes, and it has become clear that is not the issue that has placed him on this precipice, but rather an impetus to push him over the edge by nervous authorities.

Odd has been an inspiration for all of us who wish to paint like the Old Masters. He has led the way through the forest and left us a trail. **To be imprisoned for simply going against the flow, for trying to make things right, should not be the reward for a lifetime of generosity and brilliant achievement.** The court’s decision is one that needs to rightfully be overturned.

According to Odd’s wife Turid Spildo, Nerdrum never had a bank account in New York. And last, all seem to agree that, irrespective of the verdict on tax evasion, not allowing Nerdrum to paint is a deliberate attack on his artistic freedom. “Perhaps the Nerdrum case offers an obvious opportunity to realize how unproductive it is to put creative people in jail, when the case could have been solved by economic settlement,” wrote Bjørn Li, the CEO of The Nerdrum Institute in an article recently published in Scandinavia’s leading art magazine *KUNST*. “And when a prison sentence entails that our greatest painter be deprived of his brush and colors—that is, he will be denied to paint—I think the sentence is grotesque and repulsive.”

In an effort to express our support of Odd Nerdrum and sympathy

for his sentence, *American Artist* is allowing several of his colleagues, former pupils, and compatriots to voice their opinions throughout this article. It is encouraging to see the outpouring of support from the many people to whom Nerdrum has offered guidance, friendship, and mentorship over the years, during what has surely been one of the most trying times of the artist’s career. ■

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of *American Artist*.

*At the time that this article was written, the Nerdrum sentence was being appealed by the defendant. Nerdrum is currently residing in Paris, where he remains immune to the Norwegian sentence. For more information about the movement in support of Odd Nerdrum, visit [www.freeoddnerdrum.com](http://www.freeoddnerdrum.com).*

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**The Astronomer**  
2000, oil.

BELOW  
**Flock**  
2006, oil,  
78¾ x 98¾.

