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The Washington Star

MONDAY, JANUARY 2, 1978

Democracy and art

It's still a bit unclear what the Carter administration's "democratic" emphasis in federal policy toward the arts will mean in the placement of tax dollars. All we know for sure is that "elite" is a bad word in Washington these days, and that, in spite of the proliferation of theaters, orchestras, museums and ballet companies in the United States over the last 10 years, there are those who would say the arts still reach too few people to justify support with everybody's money.

A new study of the arts clientele in this country is being called upon to underscore the point. This study, sponsored by the Arts Endowment, reveals that those who go to museums, theaters and concert halls are, for the most part, people with well above average incomes and educations. It also shows that education matters more than income in deciding who goes and who doesn't.

This is news? It shouldn't be. Who needs an expensive research project to find out that people who know a lot about history and literature and music will get more out of "Parsifal" than those who don't? And there is, indeed, a natural linkage between growing up in a prosperous home and knowing about such things.

It's not an absolute correlation, though. There are plenty of poor people who manage to acquire the background to appreciate high art, and plenty of rich ones who don't. Free museums, libraries and television programs make a great deal of the necessary background available to anybody who wants it enough to look and listen. Which is how it happens that there are people who never had a college degree, an appreciation course or a junior year abroad, who do know enough about high art to enjoy what's going on in the galleries, theaters and symphony halls.

One viewpoint says this is the sort of thing a democratic government arts policy should try to foster — a situation where high art is within reach of as many people as possible, regardless of where they live or how much money they have, or how long they've gone to school. This is an attitude with a strong American tradition behind it, the outlook that built libraries and opera houses in city slums and frontier towns from New York to California. The outlook that taught a generation to love Wagner and Verdi via

Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts from New York's Metropolitan Opera House a few decades ago.

Its chief competitor is the idea that if the federal government is to subsidize art at all, it should put its money into the kind of performances most widely enjoyed already. Never mind the highbrows who think even they ought to like Rostropovich better than Lawrence Welk.

The main argument against government subsidizing of the arts is the same as the case against any such subsidy: that it limits independence and threatens creativity. Art government pays for can't help but be official art and less adventurous than the kind an artist might come up with if there were no patron to please, or, at least, keep from displeasing. On the other hand, the Michelangelos and Mozarts managed to do what they did, patron notwithstanding.

The more provocative questions are the ones about high art in a society with commitments to equality. Can anybody and everybody enjoy sophisticated music, dance, theater and the rest if the schools teach properly and the tickets are cheap enough? If not, is it worth it to the community as a whole to underwrite such things?

The answer to the first question is: probably not. A capacity for responding to the ultimate refinements of art is no more universal than an ability to understand calculus or balance on a high wire. But such capacities are more common than we will ever find out unless the arts are accessible to a broad public — unless they are there to set fire to whatever imaginations can be kindled. This is particularly important when folk art has lost so much of its vitality to commercialism.

The point is that, to those they do touch, the exaltations of high art are an enrichment of life to make almost anything else money can buy seem banal. It is also to the point that even those who do not experience this sort of enrichment directly have a share in what high art adds to the tone of a time and place. Which is to say that, in the end, the most democratic distribution of art's public benefits may be the kind that offers the largest possible number of people a chance to experience uncompromising excellence rather than the kind that patronizes them with either diluted versions of high art or pop substitutes.