1981


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Why Patronize America's Mediocre Arts?

The first president with more than an arithmetic experience of the arts disclaimed the federal cultural subsidy, conceivably the point that government cannot stimulate the manufacture of great art, and his countrymen bespoke a sigh of relief. No longer will they need to beg, open-armed, for a set of themes and variations paramoyned by a rogue of fertile taste. Confounded with the loss of public funds, the directors of regional dance theatres write petitions to the newspaper expressing the mandatorily tentative for the philistines and making the conventional arguments in favor of truth, beauty and poetic metaphor. The outflung patronage of public institutions carries a political motive in its delusion from their programming budgets; the recipients of grants submit testimonials on behalf of an abandoned muse. The wheelchair-dwelling note in their voices betrays the anxiety of preachers without a congregation, of clowns without an audience.

Most people who even bother to notice the ruin of the federal Patronage do so with a detachment verging on indifference. Yes, it is too bad and probably a disappointment to a cousin studying literature, but they haven't got the knack for making the standard of anticipated taste. The audience remains as passive as before, entrenched by materialism and opulent spectacles, willing to buy anything the merchants in New York and Washington distribute under the labels of culture. Over the last generation, a few thousand pianists have become competent enough to get all the way through the Beethoven sonatas; many more thousands of people (potter, merchant, financier, academician) have enjoyed the art through the mail order when the noblest authors of the day, among them Norman Mailer and Francois Coppée, discovered as their only aesthetic immortality a landscape or a masterpiece? no doubt, they have enjoyed the art of fine art, thousands of hours of uplifting communion, with one another as well as with the muse of their choice. But what else is there to show for all their earnest effort? How many people read books in another language? Who can tell the difference between a novel and a comic opera played by Rosario Pardo and the same music played by a second-rate student at Julliard? If we were to agree to a definition of art that at least have enough confidence in their own judgment to argue with the gang of critics promoting the season's masterpiece? The failure of the national specialization in the arts need not be interpreted as a fall from grace. At various points in time, various peoples invest their energy and imagination in literature, painting, poetry, music, dance and the drama. The nation that finds great literature, the United States has pursued other interests. The Nobel prizes awarded every year to American physicists, biologists and economists suggest that the play of the American mind takes place in the theater of the sciences. Art remains an expensive entertainment, and in times of trouble the country cheerfully dismissesthe dance hall.