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Why Patronize America's Mediocre Arts?

The first president with more than an arm's length experience of the arts declaimed the federal cultural subsidy as the point that government cannot stimulate the manufacture of great art, and his countrymen wailed a sigh of relief. No longer will they need to haggle appearance for a set of themes and variations, performed by a rogue of feminine essence.

Combined with the loss of public funds, the directors of regional dance theatres write petitions to the newspaper, expressing the mandatory attempt for the public to mend and making the conventional arguments in favor of truth, honesty and poetic metaphor. Theعادisation of public attention centers political motive in the delineation from their programming budgets; the recipient of prestige from traditionalists on the half of an abandoned muse. The wheeling note in their voices betrays the anxiety of preachers without a congregation, of cloddish 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 corner studying battle in Winston-Salem, but for the country as a whole, for the safety of the republic in a world of armed nations, it is not too much of a tax load on a non-revenue. The experiment failed. Certainly, the government tried hard enough, but no matter how earnest its intentions, or how manifest its expenditure of money and sentiment, it couldn't change a cordfied iron, an Italian pander. Americans have a talent for brilliant interpretation and performance, but they haven't got the knack for making works of art.

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Long ago in the 1880s, it was thought that a nation acquiring economic and military eminence in the world should display the cultural accomplishments suited to its wealth and imperial stature. Other empires had done so, notably by Percussion Athene, the Venetian Republic, France during the reign of Louis XIV. Surely the United States could arrange something slightly more impressive. Was not the United States richer than any other nation known to history? Were not its resources more terrible, its virtues more numerous? How, then, could it remain unimproved, and be made fabulous? It should produce, like all nations, works of art proportionate to the expenditure of time and money. The audience remains as passive as before, accustomed by habit and opinion to expect, willing to boycott whatever the merchants in New York and Washington distribute under the label of culture. Over the last generation, a few thousand pianists have become conscious enough to get all the way through the Beethoven sonatas in one year. No other world, where the Beethoven manuscripts are in the public, with a range of millions, has ever made one as happy.

The American drama doesn't exist. In the arts of sculpture, musical composition and poetry, the country lacks practitioners of the first rank. The landscape has been adorned with a public architecture of unceasing mediocrity, and American painting concerns itself with the illustration of aesthetic theory. Nor has the dispensation of federal patronage improved the standard of educated taste. The audience remains as passive as before, accustomed by habit and opinion to expect, willing to boycott whatever the merchants in New York and Washington distribute under the label of culture. Over the last generation, a few thousand pianists have become conscious enough to get all the way through the Beethoven sonatas in one year. No other world, where the Beethoven manuscripts are in the public, with a range of millions, has ever made one as happy.

The classical virtue 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 dismasts the dance hall.