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Lewis H. Lapham

WASH. POST 3/21/81

Why Patronize America's Mediocre Arts?

The first president with more than an amateur's experience of the arts decimates the federal cultural subsidy, concedes the point that government cannot stimulate the manufacture of great art, and his countrymen breathe a sigh of relief. No longer will they need to feign appreciation for a set of themes and variations performed by a troupe of feminist mimes.

Confronted with the loss of public funds, the directors of regional dance theaters write petitions to the newspapers, expressing the mandatory contempt for the philistines and making the conventional arguments in favor of truth, beauty and poetic metaphor: the custodians of public television discern a political motive in the deletions from their programming budgets; the recipients of grants submit testimonials on behalf of an abandoned muse. The whee-

dling note in their voices betrays the anxiety of preachers without a congregation, of chiefs without Indians, of actors without an audience.

Most people who even bother to notice the ruin of the federal Parnassus do so with a detachment verging on indifference. Yes, it is too bad and probably a disappointment to a cousin studying ballet in Winston-Salem, but for the country as a whole, for the safety of the public in a world of armed enemies, the cutting off of funds for the arts amounts to little more than the taking of a tax loss on a naive investment. The experiment failed. Certainly, the government tried hard enough, but no matter how earnest its intentions, or how munificent its expenditure of money and sentiment, it couldn't change a cornfield into an Italian garden. 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 1960s, it was thought that a nation acquiring economic and military eminence in the world should display the cultural appointments suitable to its wealth and imperial station. Other empires had done so, most notably Periclean Athens, 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 weapons more terrible, its virtues more numerous? How, then,

could its painting not be more luminous, its literature more profound, its music more sublime?

The questions end in comedy, as if the United States had cast itself for 20 years in the role of Molière's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme." American letters have deteriorated to the point where the well-known authors of the day, among them Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, discover in their own celebrated personae their most memorable characters. 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 decorated with a public architecture of unrivaled 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, astonished by celebrity and opulent spectacle, willing to buy whatever 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 (potters, weavers, dancers, students of creative writing) no doubt have enjoyed many 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 cello sonata played by Rostropovich and the same music played by a second-year student at Juilliard? What six people can agree on a definition of art or have enough confidence in their own judgment to argue with the gang of critics promoting the season's masterpiece?

The failure of the national speculation 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. Throughout most of its history, 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 dismisses the dance band.

The writer is editor of Harper's.