

Art and the Educated Citizen

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The Dream
and
the Reality

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Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first observers of our new society to speculate on the role that the arts would play in a democratic scheme of things. In contrast to older and more aristocratic nations, there would be no rigid dictatorship of taste imposed by a small, sophisticated, and privileged elite. The development of taste would be slow and hesitant, depending on what people wished for rather than what they could be forced to accept. As in other spheres of activity, so in the realm of artistic experience; a far greater equality of opportunity would prevail. Furthermore, with economic progress would come greater leisure for the cultivation of taste and wider opportunities for possessing and patronizing art.

Since de Tocqueville's day, many a critic has pointed out the conflict that has developed between the downward leveling of democratic behavior and the notion of artistic excellence; but the more enlightened of these commentators have recognized that there is no fundamental incompatibility between these two. The goal of a democratic society, after all, is the production of fully developed individuals, each capable of playing a rich and rewarding part in the life of the community. As William Schuman says,¹ "No form of societal organization relies more heavily on the full development of the talents of its citizens than a democracy." Indeed, the historian could point out that the two periods in our past when the arts were most eagerly encouraged, when the importance of art in the national life was most often stressed, and when artists themselves were inspired to portray and interpret that life, were also periods of vigorous democratic aspiration—the age of Jackson and the age of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The difference between philosophy and practice in the making of our culture has been described by our writers with varying degrees of hope and pessimism. Even the sympathetic de Tocqueville feared a thinning out and lowering of taste that could result from the

pressures of an uninformed majority and prophesied that a "trading spirit" would enter the arts, with unhappy consequences. Jacques Barzun² in our day has deplored the fact that only about three out of one hundred Americans actively patronize the arts, but he also finds ground for optimism in the availability of good literature and music in inexpensive forms and in the exposure to the visual arts through reproductions and articles in magazines with wide popular circulation. On the other hand, Louis Kronenberger³ pronounces the American climate hostile to art, which has no place in the actual shaping of most people's lives, and concludes that we are not an artistic people in any real sense of those words. David Reisman recognizes the gap that has existed between high culture and mass culture but asserts that we are beginning to close that gap: "The taste of the most advanced sections of the population is ever more rapidly diffused to strata formerly excluded from all but the most primitive exercise of taste."⁴

Clearly one's evaluation of progress or decline depends on one's definition of taste. It should not be conceived as a prevailing fad or fashion, nor is it a snobbish attachment to the latest new vagary in art. It is not the mere announcement of one's preference for Rembrandt over Grant Wood by people who cannot sense, feel, or understand what makes the one preferable to the other. Fundamentally, taste is the ability to separate the excellent from the shoddy, the beautifully designed from the cleverly assembled, the eloquent from the noisily assertive, the appropriate from the misplaced, the product of the imagination from that of ingenuity, the experience that enlarges and transforms one's state of mind from the one that offers no challenge to indifference and complacency. And taste begins at home. If the taste of a people is not likely to be better than its wallpapers and shop fronts (Figure 1), a closer way of measuring that taste is simply to observe a people's objects of use and adornment, to study the kind of environment that it creates for itself (Figure 2).

This approach to the problem yields depressing re-



1.
Under the slogan
of free initiative.
Photograph by
Bradford Herzog.

2.
Articles of use and
adornment. Photo-
graph by Bradford
Herzog.



sults. The student of past civilizations knows that they stamped with their high quality not only their buildings, statues, and paintings but even the simple things of daily use—the small carved discs that protected Japanese sword blades, the jugs from which the Greeks poured water and wine, the spoons of the Egyptians. By way of contrast, what can be said for the jerry-built “modernistic” boxes that line our streets, garish in color, awkward in proportion, with ill-placed windows and characterless iron grilles? No people with a developed taste would tolerate our crudely designed fabrics nor the hideous framed landscapes to be found in our dime stores. Our towns and cities are a confused assemblage of streets, and the handsome roadways that connect them are disfigured by ugly signboards, vast smoking dumps, and the graveyards of defunct motorcars. The tall commercial structures of Main Street stand beside vacant lots, some of which once held fine historic buildings that now have been sacrificed, along with the sense of the past they embodied, in the interest of parking. No community with a sense of values would thus destroy forever its own architectural heritage, nor would it raze a line of ancient elms to gain a few feet for the impatient motorist. Our indifference to the living landscape is matched only by our failure to create a man-made one; under the slogan of free initiative we tolerate the bunglers who deform the spaces in which we live and move. Christopher Tunnard is only one of many writers to deplore “public indifference to public beauty,” concluding that “if we are to justify modern American civilization before our own growing population and in the eyes of the world, the creation of a more appropriate physical shape for that society is one of the urgent tasks ahead.”⁵ The ruthless desecration of the American scene has been amply documented with text and picture in Peter Blake’s recent book, *God’s Own Junkyard*.

For America’s failure to fulfill her cultural promise, many reasons can be found, some of them historical and others contemporary. De Tocqueville noted one

of them when he remarked that our people would habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, the practical to the aesthetic. The founding fathers were by background and by necessity hard-thinking men who, if they considered the graces of life at all, thought of them as a product of the dim future when man's physical needs had been met. In the meantime the anonymous author of a pamphlet of 1719 sharply defined the New England attitude when he wrote that the plowman who raised grain was more useful to mankind than the painter "who draws only to please the eye." The persistence of this point of view can be documented by the negative response of a congressional committee in the year 1954 to a proposal that public funds be appropriated for the encouragement of the arts; these gentlemen observed that such supporting action "cannot be sustained as an absolute necessity." Thus a false dichotomy continues to exist in men's minds, by which the practice and enjoyment of the arts are placed in a remote and special category of human experience, divorced from what are taken to be the really important concerns of life.

This false distinction leads to another. Since the arts are said to have no essential relation to that part of a man's life which is spent in labor, they tend to become no more than a pleasant antidote to fatigue, an agreeable way of filling the hours of leisure. Their true role of enlightenment and inspiration is ignored.

In this frame of mind, many an American prefers that kind of soporific experience in art which makes no demands on the imagination and requires no significant departure from familiar themes and easily recognized forms. Ours is an increasingly complex world in which man's inventiveness and the vast expansion of sheer knowledge discourage one's effort to understand and to participate in the human adventure. The task of comprehending the work of the creative artist has always been baffling and difficult, and it has become more so in recent years when our most truly original artists have launched a violent challenge to tradition. It is easier for many people to assume, as Robert Oppenheimer says, that only those

things that can be comprehended without effort are really important—hence our tendency in the past and in the present to dismiss or reject those men of talent who have dared to break with artistic forms they consider no longer relevant. The genius of Frank Lloyd Wright was first recognized not here but in Europe; the records of painting in this country abound in careers thwarted or destroyed by lack of support and sympathy; Philistinism reared its ugly head in Los Angeles not long ago when a piece of modern sculpture was placed on one of its public buildings; in New York, pickets marched in front of a museum where the work of abstract sculptors was being shown. One could cite many other instances today in which the work of art has been rejected out of hand and the artist himself despised and insulted as a disturber of the visual peace. “We need a sense of hospitality,” Oppenheimer asserts, “an openness, a willingness to make room for the strange, for the thing that does not fit. . . . We need to insist that what is difficult, what is recondite, what is obscure, what is specialized, is a great part of the human treasure.”

Partly a result of Philistine intolerance is that rejection of the public by the artist which is an obvious feature of the contemporary scene. One painter recently noted the “stony illiteracy” of most Americans; another disclaims any wish or hope of being intelligible to John Doe; still another blames the crass materialism of our society, its pursuit of the false goals of money, security, and power for the gap that yawns between people and artist. In such a society, he believes, the artist can have no significant place; its false gods are rejected by him, and its values do not lend themselves to celebration in the visual-symbolic language of art. This isolation from the community, however understandable, tends only to confirm the Philistine’s stereotype of the artist as an abnormal creature who lives in a mad world of his own. One sadly contrasts this isolation with the close working relation between artist and craftsman on the one hand and his patrons on the other which existed during the Renaissance and in many subsequent times and

places, a mutual responsiveness that was healthy for both, especially in those fields of design that are closest to the life of every day. Between public and designer today stands the entrepreneur with his inevitable tendency to downgrade quality and to discourage originality. Yet there never was a time in history when a normal interplay was more necessary between the man who creates and the man who receives the creation. The vast scale of world problems, the greatly increased threats to human survival, the complexity of life itself in the modern world, all of these are giving to the individual, in the absence of counterreassurance, a shrinking sense of his own importance, a frustrating conviction of his inability to direct and control his destiny. In discussing art as man's eternal challenge to fate, André Malraux reminds us that all fine art, past and present, is a direct affirmation of man's sovereign importance in the scheme of things, a constant assurance that he is no mere cog in a mechanical universe. This silent voice is more urgently needed today than in any past age.

Another discouraging phenomenon of today is the abdication of the critic of art. His earlier function as a writer was a kind of mediation, an effort to bring the observer closer to the work of art, to hint at its meanings or lack of meanings, to present the sensitive responses of the critic himself for whatever they might be worth to the less perceptive. Never before have so many millions of words been written about the arts; yet they fall too often into one of two equally unsatisfactory categories. The highbrow critic writes a language that is as unintelligible as the forms of the work under discussion, producing a verbal parallel to the visual experience. He directs his critique to those art journals that will be read by the "advanced" connoisseur, the man who is in the know. This critic preaches to the converted. The writer of popular articles, on the other hand, serves a far wider and more naïve reading public, presenting art and the problems of the artist in a brisk, picturesque, and oversimplified way. The power of the printed word is enormous, and large numbers of people nowadays

seem to substitute the glibly expressed opinions of the critic for their own tentative ones. They seem to prefer a written description and commentary on a building, a sculpture, or a painting to their own fumbling, firsthand encounter with it. The first of these two critics surrenders an important part of his function; the second cheapens and degrades that function.

We need to remind ourselves, in the midst of this flood of words, that verbal interpretation can only imperfectly convey the essential character of a visual experience, its quality, and its impact on the senses and spirit of the observer. A translation of the reality, however vivid, is not the reality itself. "More and more of us," John Kouwenhoven points out, "experience the arts . . . filtered through some translating device."

What de Tocqueville called the "trading spirit" must be reckoned with in this connection—the obvious fact that in the media of mass entertainment it has become profitable to package art and to vulgarize it, offering it in terms considered appropriately obvious and simple for a public whose intelligence is systematically underestimated by the makers of films, television, and widely read periodicals. Hence the insistent commercials of TV which destroy the continuity of the best dramatic presentations; hence the filmed biographies of artists which convey little or nothing of the quality of their lives and work but make the most of whatever was abnormal or sensational; hence the interminable reproductions of past and present art in magazines of wide circulation, mendaciously described as being faithful to the originals; hence the tempting promise, "You too can paint a Van Gogh," if you purchase a painting kit and a book of instructions. The do-it-yourself motive, itself an admirable one, is here corrupted in order to exploit a dawning interest in art for the profit of the exploiters. Art descends once more to the level of a pleasant therapy or a topic for after-dinner conversation or the leisure-time consumption of ready-made and predigested aesthetic experience.

To our other cultural shortcomings we must add

the failure in this sphere of our educational processes, with their emphasis on what might be called "verbal thinking" and their neglect of "sight-thinking." When we ask ourselves why art is a "not unfearful, half-welcome guest" in our schools, we find several attitudes and practices that work against its acceptance as a basic discipline. Among these is a kind of vocationalism which mistakenly assumes that the man who works is a different creature from the man who plays. Neither work nor play has meaning except for the resourceful individual, the person who has developed not only his powers of analysis, his factual knowledge, and his technical skills but also his imagination, his creative capacities, and his sensitiveness to visual experience. L. P. Jacks has challenged the narrow definition of what constitutes an education by stating that it is a process of lifelong duration, "addressed throughout to the making of whole men, and vocational only in the sense that it prepares man for his grand vocation as a member of society and a citizen of the world. . . . It teaches every man a better way of doing the work he has to do and living the life he has to live."⁹ The truly educated man, he asserts, will not need to allow his leisure to be invaded and exploited by others in their own interests, for "leisure is that part of a man's life where the struggle between white angels and black for the possession of his soul goes on with the greatest intensity." And Jacks concludes that the humanities and the arts will never flourish until a closer connection is made between the work of society and its culture.

A pertinent illustration of the snubbing of the arts in our schools is the failure to provide our young people with an indispensable means of knowing the civilizations of the past, which are revealed to us in great measure through their artistic achievements. Thus fifteen million or more young Americans, according to one estimate,¹⁰ are being deprived of any deep understanding of "man's oldest form of communication." This ignorance of what mankind has

done is a poor preparation for grasping the nature of the present world.

A further cause for concern is the displacement of the humanities by the sciences which seems largely the consequence of the international situation. Always a marginal subject in our schools, art has been pushed further toward the curricular fringes by our current preoccupation with technological and scientific requirements. A report of President Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee emphasized the need for developing leadership; and it proceeded to identify these desired leaders as doctors, scholars, and engineers, with no mention whatever of artists, writers, musicians, or philosophers—an appallingly one-sided view of the nature and purpose of the American adventure. Fortunately Kennedy listened to other advisors as well,¹¹ and fortunately, too, a few scientists and businessmen can be found who deplore this view, among them the Chairman of the Board of I.B.M., Thomas J. Watson who recently warned us that "in the blazing light of man-made comets, the continuing need for an appropriate balance between science and the humanities has been blotted out."¹² Even the most intricate of machines, he reminds us, is incapable of making value judgments. Other critics have pointed out that a bare intellectualism is an inadequate instrument for coping with the problems that face modern man; they have also noted that the alleged contrast between science and art rests on a misconception of both. Several scientists have recently affirmed the importance of aesthetic sensibility and of imaginative power in their own work. A research chemist, for example, observes that the thought which guides the tool is as important as the tool itself; Einstein reached his concepts by a process that was both artistic and scientific, and essentially creative. No less an authority than the President of M.I.T. deplores that excessive intellectualism which deprives learning of its human content; in the midst of so much that is analytical and abstract, we need to regain a sense of the concrete, "the capacity to see, a sense of form and shape and design, a feeling for the plasticity of matter."¹³

Another weakness in artistic education is its lack of continuity from one level to another for those students who move from secondary to higher institutions, and continuity is just as essential for the development of one's knowledge and taste in this field as in the study of languages. What we have is at best a sporadic contact with the subject at the various levels, with no meaningful continuity and very little mutual comprehension or co-operation in this matter between those who teach art in the secondary schools and those who instruct in colleges and universities.

If students in secondary schools show faint interest in this vital subject, their indifference can in some degree be attributed to the way in which it is presented to them. To be sure, there is no one best way of instruction, but there are several poor ways, among them the imitation on this level of methods employed on the higher ones, especially the tiresome historical survey, studded with names and dates, which may actually inhibit the student's powers of observation and appreciation. Any method that opens one's eyes, develops one's sensibilities, and stimulates one's awareness of the qualities and the expressive powers of the artist's language is sure to be helpful. Any approach to art that substitutes factual knowledge for perception and discrimination may do more harm than good. It is a common complaint among college teachers of art that even those pupils who come to them with some preliminary work in this field have not developed that capacity for *seeing* which is a prerequisite to further study. From the very beginning it is important that art be understood as a noble part of man's long effort to shape his environment and express his values. The emphasis at the secondary level might well be placed on the former, if only to emphasize that art is not something in a museum, but that it is ubiquitous. At this stage a superficial glance at Rembrandt or Michelangelo may be less useful than a critical study of the student's own environment, the houses on his own streets, the family car, the statue in the square.

To remedy flaws in education so clearly traceable

to pressures from without may appear at first glance to be hopeless, the more obvious direction of attack being against the pressures themselves; yet when we cast about for a weapon against social pressures, we can scarcely find a better one in the democratic arsenal than educational leadership. To deny its power would be to deny the power of a democracy to elevate itself.

We must assume then, in good existentialist fashion, that our national quality is the sum of qualities in our institutions and proceed to lift the one of them we are dealing with according to our lights. In the popular eye the light of the humanities, and of its special filaments, the arts, has grown menacingly dim. If we wish it to burn brightly again, and burn enduringly, we had better be sure of its power sources and look carefully, even remotely, into the motives of education as well as into the resources of the mind and spirit behind them. It is to this careful examination that the succeeding chapters will be devoted.

Notes

1. William Schuman, "Have We a Culture?" in *The New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 22, 1963, p. 84.
2. Jacques Barzun, *God's Country and Mine*, Paperback edition, Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., New York, 1954.
3. Louis Kronenberger, *Company Manners*, Bobbs, Merrill, Indianapolis, 1954.
4. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961, p. 339.
5. Christopher Tunnard and Boris Pushkarev, *Man-Made America: Chaos or Control?*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1963, p. ix.
6. *An Addition to the Present Melancholy Circumstances of the Province Considered*. Boston. 1719.
7. J. Robert Oppenheimer, "Tradition and Discovery," in the American Council of Learned Societies *Newsletter*, Vol. X, New York, Oct. 1959, p. 18.
8. John Kouwenhoven, *American Studies: Words or Things?*, Wemyss Foundation, Wilmington, Del., 1963, p. 16.
9. L. P. Jacks, *The Education of the Whole Man*, University of London Press, London, 1931, pp. 36, 39.
10. G. Scott Wright, Jr., "The Ignorant Silence," in *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 44, Mar. 18, 1961, pp. 52, 53.
11. August Heckscher, *Report to the President*, Senate Document No. 28, 88th Congress, First Session, May 28, 1963, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington.
12. Thomas J. Watson, Jr., "The Case for Balance," in the American Council of Learned Societies *Newsletter*, Vol. XIV, New York, Nov. 1963, p. 2.
13. Dr. Julius A. Stratton, "Abstract and Concrete," in *The Palette*, Weston, Conn., Winter 1961, p. 18.