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# THE BUREAUCRAT AS PATRON

It would be premature to mourn the end of private patronage, pointless to disregard the significant contribution made by commerce and industry to the support of contemporary art. But it would be extremely unwise to refuse to recognize the fact in the second half of the twentieth century their significance is slight in comparison with that of those bureaucrats of culture who dispense the patronage of central and local government. They exert an influence which is disproportionate to the actual amount of money they spend, and because of the contemporary situation of art and the current uncertainties of aesthetic dogma dictate taste and modify the stylistic currents of our time.

In some European countries, France being the outstanding example, state patronage of the arts has a long history. Men such as Colbert Nieuwerkerke managed successfully a complex and efficient governmental machine for reinforcing and extending official support of traditional art forms. They were followers of taste rather than arbiters of it. They used the resources of the state partly for political ends, partly in a more general sense to support the framework of society. It is of course an historical fact that, in the long run they were unable to do so. The avant garde took over, and each of its successive waves was recognized as constituting the main art form of the period. Official patronage was mostly dissipated in the backwaters of culture.

At the same time the emergence of the public art gallery was bringing into prominence the role of the curator as a patron of art. In this case there was a new dimension added to pure economics. It soon became obvious that by having his work hung in a public collection a artist was receiving a kind of imprimatur of excellence which would effect his status, quieten the hesitancies of potential purchasers, and enhance its market value. Themselves usually minor artists or connoisseurs - in the old-fashioned sense of the word, the earlier generation of curators and directors were generally cautious and conservative in their tastes. By the late 1930s however this pattern was beginning to alter; the purchasing policies of art galleries became more adventurous, their influence on contemporary art more apparent. Men such as James Thrall Soby,

Alfred H. Barr and especially James Johnson Sweeney played a seminal role in educating American taste and latering the patterns of patronage. Had it not been for them it is doubtful whether the New York School of the 1950s would have achieved its status so rapidly and become so effective on the world scene. The Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum became the salons of cultural haute couture where artist and customer alike could discover what style was 'in' at any particular time.

The effects were immediately apparent. Not only did many artists who were basically unsure of their own creative convictions start to look to public art galleries for the source of their style, but also many began to produce works which by reason of their size or specific nature would be unsuitable for the private patron and his domestic ambiance, and which were specifically intended for museums. In many cases of course the assumption must have been that having acquired the cachet of being represented in a museum, they could then produce works of a type more suitable for private patrons. Perhaps however one of the most obvious effects of museum patronage (and also of patronage by commercial corporations with spacious premises) had been to put an aesthetically irrelevant premium on large works, which are, often enough an artistically illogical magnifications of a small concept.

Since the end of the Second War there was been an explosion of semi-autonomous governmental agencies connected with the encouragement and promotion of the arts. Typical of these are the Arts Council and the British Council which operate in Great Britain. The Arts Council is concerned with the domestic scene, the British Council with the promotion of British art abroad.

Founded during the war as the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, the Arts Council is supported, but not controlled by the government. Some idea of its growth may be deduced from the fact that in 1964 it received a grant of £ 2,730,000 of which £ 110,000 was spent on the visual arts; in 1977 it received a grant of £ 37,150,000 of which £ 1,675,000 was spent on the visual arts. It is operated by a full-time staff who are under the nominal control of a series of councils and panels. In the visual arts it organises exhibitions, mostly of contemporary art, owns and runs a number of galleries, gives extensive personal grants to artists, subsidises provincial art centres, supports publications and reprographic projects, and generally exercises ad dominant influence on the art world of Britain. The British Council sends exhibitions of British art abroad, and in the context of what one might describe as "the Global Museum" (to paraphase Marshall McLuhan) can be largely responsible for creating the reputation of an artist. Henry Moore's fame, for instance, owes a great deal to the activities of the British Council in the 1950s.

The activities of these bodies too has had a marked influence on the nature of art. They have made possible the continued existence of art forms which have not the slightest element of public appeal or intelligibility, as well as those varieties of performance art which are not marketable in the ordinary sense. Perhaps I may quote an example from the United States, recorded in the Bulletin of the Museum of Contemporary Art:

"Originally schedulded to perform in February, but postponed due to bad weather conditions, Julia Heyward will present a new work at the Museum. Drawing on her background studies in opera, yodelling and Mongolian type singing, Ms. Heyward uses sound displacement (ventriloguism) and subliminal audio and visual techniques in her performances. Her work is also characterised by the intriguing use of feminist cant, pop and religious images stemming from her childhood reminiscences as the daughter of a preacher ... She was awarded both an NEA and New York State CAPS grant in 1976."

Circumstances have altered the personalities both of gallery curators and those other officials who run government-supported agencies. They are professional administrators, who by works of art which they will never own, nor, unlike ther predecessors do they see public collections as an extension of their own tastes. Trained usually as art historians, they tend to apply to the art of the present the academic disciplines and attitudes which they have been trained to apply to the art of the past. Called upon, for instance, as recently happened in England, to defend the acquisition of a group of Carl Andre bricks for the Tate Gallery, they did so in terms of the provenance and chemical constitution of the bricks themselves, and by references to Branousi, Bridget Riley, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Rothko, Pollock, Anthony Caro and Richard Long.

The modern artist is therefore heavily dependent for his patronage on a number of partly anonymous bureaucrats whose varying tenures of office and interdepartmental rivalries may produce changes of which he can only be partly cognisant, whose attitudes may be determined by personal predilections which he cannot influence, and whose processes of selection are at best arcane. Much of his activity therefore is devoted to guessing at the answers to these mysteries, and his career may depend on the extent to which he is successful. This is not necessarily a bad thing. All systems of patronage have their drawbacks. But it is something of which we should be critically aware.