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LUNCHEON -- NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

THE ARTS AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

The festival in which we are now participating marks a further step -- not the first step but a very important and encouraging one -- along the path of the definition of the relationship of the arts to American society: to our society in its multitudinous private organizational forms, and to our society in its political forms, as symbolized by the home of the Chief Executive whose gracious hospitality we are enjoying today.

This is largely new ground -- ground entered only recently, during my own lifetime, actually, and then only hesitantly and tentatively. Many of the Founding Fathers, it is true, were cultivated men, in whose personal world of taste and interest things of beauty had their decent, eighteenth-century place. But even to most of them, art remained a private matter -- an embellishment of personal life, rather than a public concern, least of all a concern of the federal government. And the nineteenth century America that followed, preoccupied with its physical and economic expansion, had little time or patience for the cultivation of beauty. Except in the field of religious literature, the fine arts had always been slighted, anyway, in the Puritan tradition; and the harsh discipline of the frontier had done nothing to correct this omission. The effects of the resulting neglect still stare us in the face in the person of those dreary architectural and sculptural monuments to which our grandfathers or great grandfathers gave their blessing when public duty or individual pretention forced them to make aesthetic choices.

I myself grew up in the Middle West just as that nineteenth-century America was approaching its end: in the years, that is, just before the First World War; and I can remember very well the great blank spots that still existed on the cultural horizons of that society. My father was a lawyer, and a man of fine feeling. With a different education he would have had different tastes. He had been the first of his line to receive a college education. Classical languages and literature had a place in his concept of the world, and they had a certain place in the home. But I cannot recall that in all my boyhood, or for that matter in all my educational career, anyone ever undertook to instruct me in the visual arts or even to draw my attention to them; and serious music became a part of life only when I went away to college. Similar conditions existed, I am sure, in a multitude of other American homes of that day. It is only in the brief intervening period that art has begun to become a perceptible factor in the lives of great numbers of our people, particularly our young people; and only quite recently that we have become aware that in the relationship of the arts to our society we have a duty, an opportunity -- and a problem.

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To those of you who are here today there is no need for me to emphasize that the arts (and I am using this term today in the broader sense, to include the literary and musical as well as visual arts, and the great functions of interpretive performance as well as those of initial creativity) -- there is no need for me to emphasize that the arts are an essential part of the greatness of a nation. But this has not always been recognized by all of our people; and I am not sure that it is widely enough recognized even today.

Without the arts, no national culture can be fully formed. Without the arts, no people can be fully aware of itself. The arts represent the projection on to a very special and refined plane of that search for an inner harmony, for a correct and satisfying relationship among things, which lies at the heart of so much of the effort of civilization. A society whose activity does not carry significantly on to this plane never achieves the finest expression of its own genius, or even its proper documentation in history. A glance at the history text-books will suffice to show that while military exploits and economic strength may mean much to contemporaries, it is the achievements in the realm of the intellect and the spirit that are remembered in history. It is these that permit the genius of a civilization to have meaning beyond the limits of its own place and time. The battles of the condottieri, their struggles for power, the details of their efforts at material aggrandizement: these things are largely lost from memory today in the dusty record of personal cupidities and ambitions; but the notebooks of Leonardo are a part of the culture of our time, and they share this quality with a host of other products, intellectual and artistic, of the Italian Renaissance. And if this new stormy civilization of ours, which in so short a time has conquered a continent and risen to the acme of world power, is to take a place in history remotely commensurate with its material achievements, then it, too, is going to have to project in a major way its spirit, its dreams, and its struggles on to that plane of special refinement which we know as the cultivation of beauty.

We would be unrealistic if we failed to recognize that for the modern democratic society this presents problems. The arts can flourish only in a certain sort of an environment -- an environment which not only provides the special economic support they unquestionably require but surrounds them with an atmosphere of respect and understanding and critical encouragement. In earlier ages, this sort of support came normally from royal courts or from the personal establishments of great lords or country gentlemen. Their palaces and their chateaux were the usual hosts to artistic endeavor. This had the advantage that artistic standards rested on the patronage of relatively well-educated and in any case highly independent people, quite free of bureaucratic pressures or other ulterior compulsions. The system was not perfect; but none, to my knowledge, has ever done better.

And the question now is: Can an adequate substitute for this system be devised in a great egalitarian republic such as our own, with its lack of an aristocratic elite, and with its tendency to concentrate financial power either in government or in great corporate bodies obliged for one reason or another to reconcile their activities with the prevailing trends of popular taste and opinion? Can such a society supply a quality of support for the arts that will allow them, and encourage them, to unfold themselves and to release their resources to a degree comparable to that which the individual patronage of earlier ages achieved?

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Let no one imagine that this is going to be easy. If art is essential to the flowering of a society, it is also to some degree eccentric to its everyday life. Beauty is open-ended; and the cultivation of it, whether creatively or in interpretive performance or even in the sense of passive enjoyment, is an unsettling experience -- something not to be shared with everybody, hard to reconcile with the superficialities of daily life, top-heavy and unmanageable, sometimes even to the point of self-destruction. You cannot move easily -- at least, most people cannot -- from this sort of a preoccupation to the platitudes and conventions by which the rest of us live. For this reason, the relation of the dedicated artist to his lay environment, while having in a few fortunate cases isolated moments of success and intimacy and triumph, tends to be difficult and often tragic. The artist, in other words, is an odd ball, easy to have around only for those who understand him and his problems, and not always easy for them.

In addition to this, as another real difficulty in the encouragement of the arts by the democratic society, you have the gap that normally exists between the aesthetic feeling of the artist himself and that of the lay public. This is a problem that affects most keenly the creative arts. The performing artist, whose skills are developed from the start in close association with public reaction and are largely dependent upon it, does not have quite the same problem.

This difficulty is not new. It is not peculiar to democracies. It has existed to some extent, surely, in all ages. It is a difficulty inherent in the exploratory, ground-breaking nature of most artistic creativity, in the more rapid development and refinement of taste in people who live professionally in the medium than in those who do not, and in the fact that aesthetic understanding is so largely, for everyone, an acquired, rather than a natural characteristic. All this being so, new artistic form will always tend to appear to the layman, initially, as something strange, partially unintelligible, often even implausible as a claimant on true aesthetic value.

What this means, as I see it, is that the relationship between the artist and those non-artists on whom he is dependent for financial and moral support (and in our case this means American society in general) can be successful only if it is marked by a high degree of forbearance on both sides.

Society, for its part, has to recognize and accept the uniqueness of the artist and the eccentricity of his relationship to the rest of us. Society must be prepared for, and must learn to take good-naturedly the unavoidable gap between the level of the artist's taste and its own. Finally, it must be willing to recognize and to meet within reason the very special needs of the artistic community in the way of financial support.

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Let me just say a particular word about this last requirement. There can be few branches of human creativity where the financial rewards, and not just the rewards but even the securing of the basic necessities without which work cannot be performed at all, are subject to greater hazards and uncertainties than in the case of the arts. This has always been so. To some extent, I suppose, it lies in the very nature of the enterprise: in the erratic habits of the artist himself, in the difficulties of public appreciation, in the need of many artists, as indeed of many people in other fields, for some external discipline to force them to sit down and work at all. If material security were available from the start, then there are artists, I am afraid, who would not work much harder than many of the rest of us would, in such circumstances. Still, it is a problem. In our country today artistic achievement in almost all fields has its occasional windfalls of sudden and plenteous remuneration, depending usually on the extent to which it lends itself to exploitation by the mass media; but seldom does it afford any regular financial security even during the years of high creativity, or even, in fact, as a reward for high creativity, and more seldom still does it allow any proper provision for old age. The artist or writer or composer who is forced to live solely by whatever commercial exploitation his work can invite is apt to find his talent pinched and distorted by the ulterior pressures this exploitation engenders; and in this case not only he himself but the cultural world to which he belongs becomes the loser.

This is why art, to be all that it can be and should be, has always required the helping hand of the Maecenas. But this presents a special problem for the democracy, where the person of the Maecenas tends to be an organization rather than an individual, because this hand, to be effective, must be a wise and discriminating one, above the average in aesthetic understanding, familiar with the history of art, familiar with the contemporary artist and his problems, and, above all, devoid of ulterior motive. This is why the support of the arts must not be left to the advertiser or to any other commercial exploiter. And this is also why the artist himself, as a member of a collective professional body, and as a person with peculiar qualities for judging the work of his fellows, should always be heard and his opinion taken into consideration in those decisions by which support for the arts finds its shape and its direction.

Those who set out to support the arts, as many corporate and political bodies in this country are now so commendably beginning to do, will have to bear these obligations in mind if they hope to be effective. They will have to listen to what the artist himself has to say, individually and through the medium of his professional associations. To some extent, they will have to take him on faith. They cannot expect to make of him the instrument of their own predilections in the field of artistic taste. Their ceiling of aesthetic appreciation cannot be identical with his. They will have to give him a certain area - not an unlimited one but a considerable one - of aesthetic credit. They, too, have their right to a critical judgment over the artist's work. There are certain demands of quality and intelligibility they can, over the long run, legitimately place upon it. But they will do well to try to exercise

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this critical influence gently and gradually, putting their feelings to the artist not as demands or conditions with respect to individual creations, but as needs -- informed, sensitive and understandable needs, which the artist himself should be concerned to recognize and to respect, if he is going to respect public feelings at all, if he is going to care at all for moral and material support from outside the narrow ranks of his own profession.

This brings me to the question of the artist and what we may expect of him. Are there obligations of patience and forbearance that rest on him, as well as on those who move to his support? I think there are. They are not, God knows, the obligations of a servile ingratiation or a prostitution of artistic conviction. They are the obligations that flow from a recognition of the essentiality of the bond between artist and public, without which not only would the arts lack the material support essential to their prospering but they would, in my deep conviction, lose the vital roots that give them life.

If the artist wants real freedom in his art, then he must himself define and respect its limitations; for freedom has no meaning except in terms of the restraints that it implies and accepts. In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister, said Goethe. Mastery reveals itself in the limitations it is willing to accept. The ferocious pursuit of a total artistic freedom which one senses in the activity not of the great artists but of many of those who hope some day to be considered great, seems to me not only to reflect a serious philosophic illusion, which will ultimately revenge itself on the pursuer, but to constitute, insofar as it is reckless and egotistical and inconsiderate, a disservice to this bond with the public which the artist should be concerned to preserve.

The artist, as I see it, has an obligation of responsibility for the integrity of his own art. If he does not want the public to support the wrong things, or to lose interest in his art entirely, then he must do what he can to shield the public from artistic frivolity and charlatanism. He must be concerned to protect art from debasement at the hands of the indecencies: not just the indecencies in the sense of pornography (though these, too), but indecencies of exhibitionism, of sensation-hunting, of cheap trickery of all sorts. If he has any sense of devotion to his art as a function of human life -- any feeling for it as more than as a vehicle for the expression of his own particular ego -- then he must acknowledge a concern for the way it appears to others. He must not just stand aside and permit it to be abused, without his protest, by people who are not serious -- by people, above all, who claim the privileges of the artist's position without ever having really accepted the discipline of the art. The eccentricities of the artistic temperament are difficult enough to endure even in one who has shouldered the burden of that discipline; they are intolerable in one who has not. It is up to the artistic community, it seems to me, to see to it that people are not permitted to masquerade in the mantle of the profession with no greater claim to this distinction than the novelty, the ingeniousness or the extremism of what they have done.

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Beyond this, when it comes to the artist and his obligations, there is only one more matter I would touch, and I would prefer to touch it by placing a question rather than by making a judgment. Does the artist (and I am thinking here rather of the painter and the composer than of the writer) -- does the artist have an obligation to recognize, in the pursuit of his art, the need for communication with people outside the select field of his own artistic colleagues -- if not the wider public then at least those who endeavor with good will and intelligence to understand what he does? Does he have an obligation to try to overcome at least a portion of that gap I mentioned earlier between professional taste and lay taste?

There are, I am sure, many artists who would answer this with an emphatic negative. The artist, they would say, has only one duty, which is to follow his own artistic conscience; it is no proper concern of his whether anyone else understands what he does. Let the chips fall where they may.

If this is the answer, so be it. If this is the way some artists feel, then for themselves, at any rate, we must respect the feeling; for the artist's hand, I am sure, is one that is never forced to good advantage. I am also aware that there are many cases in which what an artist has to say to other artists, albeit unintelligible to many of the rest of us at the time, becomes available to us later in other ways, through the medium of artists who have been influenced by it, but who themselves speak in a language easier for the rest of us to understand. So I have no disrespect for what we might call the artist's artist.

But I find myself hoping it will never be entirely, or unnecessarily, this way. I find myself hoping it, first, for the artist's sake. Because it seems to me implausible that he should not suffer from a sad sort of loneliness if, in and through his art, he cannot talk to, and make himself directly understood to, wider circles of mankind.

If art is to be regarded as a medium of communication -- if what is involved is not just the creation of an object of beauty as an end in itself but also the communication of feelings and insights to other people, then surely this function must not stop just in the narrow circle of professional colleagues alone. It was not, after all, just out of this circle that artists were born, that they derived their feelings, their humanity, their very capacity for artistic reaction. Surely there is some meaning and some value in the umbilical cord that connects them with the society in which they had their origin. It is not only that without respect for this bond they cannot expect the material support and the environment of understanding and sympathy important to the flourishing of their art; but I find myself wondering whether their art itself can fully develop -- whether it must not dry up and wither away for lack of air -- if they have no commitment and no stimulus other than the ministrations of a closed circle of self-appointed devotees -- if they lose the quality, in other words, that makes their dedication part of the general experience of the human family.

But beyond this, I have another and more selfish reason for hoping that they will not cut themselves off too sharply from the rest of us -- that they will have patience with us and will go out of their way to make things clear to us. This is that we, as a society, also need them. "To the artist's loneliness," my colleague Robert Oppenheimer once said, "there is a complementary great and terrible barrenness in the lives of men. They are deprived of the illumination, the light and tenderness and insight of an intelligible interpretation, in contemporary terms, of the sorrows and wonders and gaieties and follies of man's life." I cannot say it better. It is we who are the poorer when the artist becomes indifferent to our understanding or despairs of it.

These rules of mutual forbearance are the prerequisites, then, as I see them for a successful relationship between American society and the arts. And I should like to say, in conclusion, that I can think of no relationship that has more exciting, more hopeful possibilities. I have a feeling -- and I suspect many of you share it -- that we stand here, in this field of our national life, on the threshold of great developments. I have an impression that the things that make us all Americans -- the sense of the beauty and mystery of this continent; the very considerable depth, by now, of a common historical experience; the ideals and hopes and illusions and reverses we have known together; even the differences that divide us, the dilemmas we face; our tragedies as well as our successes; the things that make it impossible for any of us, bad Americans as we may be, ever to be fully anything else -- I have an impression that all these things, which we may call for lack of a better term, the national spirit, are now beginning to work within us in a new way and to find expression as they have never done before, with a power and eloquence little short of revolutionary, on that special plane of human feeling to which I referred at the outset of these remarks: on the plane of poetry and of fiction, of dramaturgy, dancing, and theatre, of painting and drawing and sculpture, of architecture, of the interpretation of older music and the creation of new.

If I am even approximately justified in this impression, then we can afford to pocket without despair frustrations and disappointments in other theatres of our national life; for then we are about to add not just a new dimension but the greatest of all dimensions to our quality as a nation, and to our ability, above all, to contribute to the progress of life throughout our troubled and tortured planet.

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