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*Money for Art:
The Contemporary and the Canon*

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Almost 50 years ago, the art critic Leo Steinberg published an essay with the evocative title “Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public.” In it, he described what might be called an “understanding gap” between working artists and the public, along with the parallel tendency of the public to be confused—if not completely put off—by what contemporary artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were then creating.¹

Decades later, that plight hasn’t diminished much. Looking at a lot of what is today celebrated as art, much of the public can register only confusion. If the plight is any less than Steinberg diagnosed in 1962, it may be because more and more people have simply dismissed contemporary art as something that has no capacity to speak to them in a meaningful way.

I’ve subtitled my talk today “The Contemporary and the Canon” because I believe the relationship between these two fields, or classifications, of art is one of the keys to thinking clearly about the public role of art in general, and whether—and if so, how—public money should be spent on them. Moreover, this is a good way in which conservatives, in particular, can talk about art, and even about public funding for the arts without having it catch in their throats. I should state early on that public funding for the arts should catch in the throat of libertarians, but arts policy is one of those realms in which the distance between the two camps is significant. For the conservative, if not the libertarian, the greater threat is contemporary popular culture with its ultimately corrosive attitudes toward art, not government spending on the arts. How ought conservatives to orient ourselves toward the culture? Can our understanding of the Market offer any insight into the art world?

Among other things, conservatives are interested in the preservation of civilization, and in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud acknowledged that although “beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it... civilization could not do without it.” Indeed he ranks it alongside order itself as having a “special position among the requirements of a civilization.” Among other things, this gives utilitarians a gentle but often-needed reminder “that civilization is not exclusively taken up with what is useful...” Conserving that which is beautiful—and preserving and protecting the very idea of beauty—is in our interest in the same way that preserving the idea of order is in our interest.²

¹ Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972, 2007).

² See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961, 1989, 2010), 159, 69.

There is an illuminating analogy, I think, that can be teased out from the four concepts of Art, the Market, the Contemporary and the Canon. In short, the Contemporary is to the Market as the Canon is to “Art.” (That’s “Art” with a capital A and quotation marks around it.) In each pair, the former dwells largely within and gains support from the latter. Contemporary art of all ages inhabits the market of its day. When one thinks of contemporary art, one thinks of galleries. Now I know that occasionally the work of a canonical master will find its way into an auction house, and then there is the perception, at least, of the market being in play, but fortunately we’ve decided as a culture that canonical masterworks are best looked after by pulling them out of the market and tucking them into institutions we call museums. The market isn’t the best custodian of the Canon. When one thinks of the Canon, one thinks of capital-A Art. Canonical works are sort of tucked away into this category, this concept, and they operate within it and in a way are protected by it.

So we like to think of capital-A “Art” as shielded from the market to some degree: shielded by this idea of the Canon. How best to maintain the serious attitude toward art (which is really the foundation of this shielding) is a question that conservatives ought to weigh in on. Wisely spent, government money can be an ally in this enterprise, even though in the past it has more often than not worked in the opposite direction.

The relationship of conservatives to culture touches both the contemporary and the Canon inasmuch as we’re usually skeptical of one and protective of the other. The latter is quite counter-cultural in fact, and you need look no further than academic assaults on the very idea of an authoritative canon to see how different is the conservative’s regard for it.

Nor do you need to look far in order to justify skepticism toward the contemporary. In 1962, Steinberg wrote that “Contemporary art is constantly inviting us to applaud the destruction of values which we still cherish... while the positive cause, for the sake of which sacrifices are made, is rarely made clear.”³ Even though he wrote this sentence thinking primarily of artists who feel like their own established styles are threatened when art spins off in a radically different direction, how much more so today—hearing as we still do the echoes, for example, of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*—can the public think of contemporary art as working to destroy values? Art remains, as Jacques Barzun characterized it back in 1974, a destroyer. But, as you’ll remember, he elsewhere in that series of lectures characterized it as a redeemer.⁴ There’s actually lots of wonderful art being created today that does not seek to destroy values or undermine moral convention. It does not gain much attention from the broader culture but it exists. That’s the concept of art that conservatives seek to nurture.

Such tensions are an indication that the perceptions and the interests of artists and of the public are not always in perfect alignment. Sometimes they’re even antagonistic toward each other.

But not every layman is inclined to place the blame solely on the artist. Almost at the same time that Steinberg was writing “Contemporary Art and the Plight of the

³ Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 10.

⁴ See Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975), chapters three and four.

Public,” Richard Weaver was also turning his attention to art and culture and the ways in which the emerging contemporary styles seemed increasingly at odds—if not confrontational—with the broader society. Weaver, however, largely blamed the public for becoming overly vulgar and sentimental, impulses that cripple the perception of serious art. Over the past century, he wrote, “there has been introduced in our culture a factor of vulgarity that touches many things and which works powerfully against the discipline of respect.” The dominant trend of popular art, he said, was “in the direction of non-serious.” Weaver wrote this in 1961, the year before Andy Warhol debuted his Campbell’s soup cans.⁵

Weaver believed that for many serious artists it was “impossible to make a deal with these forces [that is, the vulgarity and sentimentality], and we should not be surprised if in striking back the artist has done so in ways even intended to be offensive. He has sometimes shown defiance and contempt toward those who would deny his level of seriousness.” To bolster his point, Weaver draws our attention to Walt Whitman’s often-overlooked remark that “to have great poets, there must be great audiences, too.”

Given this complexity, it’s no wonder then that public spending for the arts is so fraught with difficulties and is such a minefield. A good bit of the problem is that the question right at the heart of public funding is rarely asked openly and is completely lost in the uproar that inevitably accompanies the occasional controversy. Simply put, that question is “Who ought to be the central beneficiary of arts funding, the American artist or the American people?” The conservative answer (and, I submit, the answer that offers a greater benefit to the arts as a whole) is “the American people.” Walt Whitman may have agreed.

Today it’s even more clear that Weaver was correct in seeing that broader cultural trends can damage the way in which the public thinks about art. These days however there are even more forces operating in the culture that create problems, namely political correctness and its cousin multiculturalism.

When critic and author Roger Kimball speaks of the way in which political correctness influences art he does not simply mean, as he puts it, “hypersensitivity to this week’s roster of approved victims and virtuous causes” but rather “the determined effort to subordinate art to a non-artistic agenda.” Such usurpation reduces art “to a prop in an essentially non- or extra-artistic drama.”⁶ It’s also what Stalin required of his artists.

This especially began to influence contemporary art in the 1970s. To recount the story of art in that sorry decade would be beyond our scope here, but in general, two things happened: First, the convention that there was one main current of art that grew out of the past and was pulled forward by an identifiable avant-garde collapsed. Stylistically, art in the 1970s became a riot of different and celebrated styles, while the traditional role of the avant-garde quickly evaporated. There were simply no longer any accepted artistic conventions against which it could push and expect resistance. Second, into this chaotic and fundamentally changed landscape stormed the identity politics that

⁵ Ted J. Smith III, ed., *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2000), 415.

⁶ Roger Kimball, *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004), xiii-xiv.

had been gestating in the culture in the 1960s, but that had been largely kept out of art because of the dominance of Pop and then Minimalism.

In the 1970s, as this unprecedented artistic pluralism set in, art also began absorbing the effects of aggressively egalitarian politics. Art came to be celebrated not for any quality within it, but for the identity of its creator: celebrate and proclaim the art, and by extension you therefore were understood to celebrate and affirm the artist, and increasingly the group to which he or she belongs. The Carter administration's NEA ran into a whirlwind of trouble when in 1977 women's groups tore into it for not giving women artists their fair share of grants. There were protests at the Whitney, the MOMA, the Corcoran and the LA County Museum of Art, and the White House finally issued a directive to eliminate discrimination against "women art professionals" in the distribution of federal grants.

Art became just another way of asserting an identity: homosexual art, Chicano art, feminist art. It was transformed from an end into a means, and a means largely dismissive of traditional ideas of beauty. One can see this in the way controversial art ceased to be defended in terms of aesthetics, skill, or historical rootedness, and came to be defended instead in political terms of free speech. And so it went, the regnant idea of art becoming all but unrecognizable to conservatives. The tendency became so egregious that even *The New York Times* finally took offense: the editors complained that the Arts Endowment was being "increasingly used to serve social and political policy first," instead of artistic excellence.⁷

This will not do. In order to justify taxpayer support, not just to conservatives but to anyone who sees the broader threat clearly, what the arts provide to society must be more than individualistic or crassly political in nature. If the sort of art the government supports drives an already individualistic, fragmented society farther apart, it's not a legitimate government activity. On the other hand, once conservatives see the potential—not necessarily the likelihood, but the potential—for the NEA to use its grants in a way to counter this, it's easier to support.

Exposure to great art—art in the formal sense that I believe conservatives think of it—keeps healthy individualism from becoming isolation by reminding people of their common humanity and less of their individuality. "How much larger your life would be," wrote G.K. Chesterton in 1908, "if your self could become smaller in it."⁸ Such is the gift that the conservative concept of the proper interaction with great art offers to an aimless, selfish society. Such art provides a touchstone of community in an increasingly displaced society. Great art takes note of those things that are similar, not different, in all people. Lesser forms of art, not to mention multiculturalism, do not do this.

Multiculturalism, rather than being a varying array of different cultural expressions (as its name seeks to imply), is actually a culture in and of itself, a rival—and a jealous one at that—to what before had been thought of as "American" culture. Although claiming to celebrate distinctions, it works to calcify those distinctions into divisions, and to displace the broader culture in which it operates. In the face of this it

⁷ See David A. Smith, *Money for Art: The Tangled Web of Art and Politics in American Democracy* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 2008), 147-151.

⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Co., 1908), 34-35.

would seem that exposure to great art, canonical art of the western tradition, is needed now more than ever.

The audience—that is, the public—has been conditioned to accept this rival culture in an uncritical even supine way, seeing it only as a vaguely positive and empowering force, not as the corrosive agent that it actually is. (I would proffer the collapse of arts education in the public schools as one of the reason for this, although the unpacking of that would take up an entire conference, let alone a panel.)

Multiculturalism works on Art rather like the market would work on the Canon: devaluing works into a cheaper, more transient, and ultimately far less meaningful currency, drained of transcendent capabilities.

The ability to communicate meaningfully through abstract images, wrote G. K. Chesterton in 1925, is one thing that makes man distinct from animals. “Art,” he said, is “the signature of man.” This utter distinctiveness makes art vitally and continually important in human society as the antidote to a fatal slide into isolated and self-centered individualism. From 2003-2009 the NEA began to act on the assumption that programs designed to arrest this slide ought to be its primary assignment, and a handful of distinctive programs shaped the Endowment into the nation’s premier evangelist for good, even canonical, art. It became clear that the most legitimate aim of government funds for the arts would be to awaken an appreciation for the best art ever made in those who would be the next generation of artists, patrons, and aficionados. It’s not a coincidence that during those years congressional support for the NEA rose to unprecedented levels. (Now however, the focus is swinging back to the artist, and the future of the agency is considerably less clear.)

To the degree that the Endowment can function in this way, with this task as its mission, public spending might also restore a sense of community—a community with a wider appreciation of the power of art to bring people together instead of push them apart. Doing this might even restore both a popular respect for the Canon and a vibrant contemporary art as well, both of which might again speak to more than just a few.